

The Politics of Love: Chicanas (Re) Write Love and Sexuality in Twentieth Century  
Literature

by  
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To all the whistleblowers out there.

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## Abstract

In spite of the substantial amount of critical and theoretical work that has been produced on intersectional feminism in the past decades, I believe there is thin strand missing within the feminist agenda, which is love as a political category. This dissertation addresses the fact that male privilege has dominated all philosophical endeavors in regard to the meaning of love throughout history. On the other hand, anarcho-feminist author and activist Emma Goldman during the first half of the twentieth century, emphasized the responsibility we all have to shed light on the political aspects of a woman's private life. Through Goldman's theory, I argue Chicana and Latina authors in the U.S. during the second half of the twentieth century, rather than pondering on the meaning love, poignantly question how is it women love, especially the ones from a Hispanic background, and how do religion, dogma, machismo, myths and legends inform the way they relate intimately.

For this purpose, I focus on the novel *Under the feet of Jesus* by Helena María Viramontes, the play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* by Cherríe Moraga and three poems by chicana lesbians: *deseo* by Karen T. Delgadillo, *I believe en la Mujer* by Cathy Arellano and *From Between Our Legs* by Natashia López; in order to expose the matrix of love (a set of unspoken rules that regulate how a woman is expected to love and relate to others -including God- intimately) revealing the contradictions that women are socially obliged to inhabit. Taking into consideration how intimate relationships are those where women are most likely to experience interpersonal violence and subjugation, I also examine through poetry the belief systems that keep Latinas and Chicanas queer/lesbians ostracized. I argue

literature, drama and poetry function as forms of contestation and subversion against the moral, religious or mythical landscape that hold Latinas and Chicanas hostage and keep them marginalized even within their own families and communities.

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## Preface

I have no right to speak of  
freedom when I myself have  
become abject slave in my  
love.  
—Emma Goldman

Over the course of the past decade much progress has been made in theorizing intersectionality within feminism. All around the world women have fought to educate others, to be heard, and to open spaces for other women to express themselves creatively. In the United States, since the beginning of the Trump administration, the fight that Latinas have on our hands has become more grueling than ever—our mere existence is an act of rebellion. I started writing this book in the United States, while living and working in Houston during the Obama administration. The #MeToo movement did not yet exist in the mainstream media, and although some perhaps hoped for a physical wall along the border between Mexico and the United States, few dared to say it out loud.

Before numerous and inconceivable acts of bigotry, sexism and racism, against the Latino community during and after Trump’s election surfaced through social media, I moved back home to Mexico City. Something inexplicable made me believe I would be safe back home, but after six years of living in Houston the transition was not a smooth one. I came back to a place I did not quite belong to, forgetting words in my own language, dreaming in English and being labeled “pocha.” That was the least of my problems in adjusting to being back home, though. I had forgotten that I was not supposed to walk freely in public—just because I am a woman.



Thanks to social media, in Mexico these days women are warning other women about the dangers they face every day in public spaces and the violence they endure in private. Riots have occurred following reports that police were responsible for the rape and death of women. Although one may think there is nothing new about violence against women, and moreover that the justice system—especially in Mexico—is generally considered incompetent, corrupt and serving only the interests of the powerful, awareness of the pervasive violence against women and police corruption is different from living it. I came back to “a home” where, according to the United Nations, every day nine women from every social class and background are killed, six out of ten women face life-threatening violence at work or home, and 41% of Mexican women have been raped at some point in their lives.

Although my existence and experiences have made me one of these statistics, I somehow realized after coming home that all along I had accepted what happened to me as just another aspect of being a woman. After questioning this thought and dismissing the denial aspect of it, nothing seemed the same, and the original dissertation about the archetypes of femininity reconstructed by Latina writers in the United States that I had been writing for years felt to me hollow and obsolete. How could I earn the right to become a doctor if my writing was not related to what keeps me up at night, the problems I desperately wish to understand, and wish, one day, I can help change through my work as a professor, an academic, a writer and an actress? I firmly believe that our work as academics *must* reach the world beyond the seminar room and the lecture hall. I find it useless to be part of a

group of people that is constantly and only talking amongst themselves. I believe our academic endeavors must be accessible to everyone, and close enough to our hearts that we are able to continuously question them along the way with the help of our students. Moreover, I believe that we should be confident enough in the fact that what we convey to our students will have a positive impact in our community.

With all of this in mind, I realized maybe there is a thin strand missing within the contemporary feminist debate. This line of thinking pertains to how, in every culture, the patriarchy establishes the specific way a woman is expected to love and be loved. In the particular case of the Latino community in the United States, women are still confined to the same expectations their mother culture has taught them. This is to say that the matrix of love, a complex of patriarchal Catholic ideology and racist, anti-immigrant-based politics inherited and perpetuated across the US/Mexico border, is almost embedded in our DNA. Generation after generation *las mujeres aman desde la desventaja*. This phrase—which to me is untranslatable in its aptness—goes far beyond the private sphere of the family structure and spills over into public spaces, hindering the feminist agenda even in the simple terms of equality.

## **Introduction: Las mujeres aman desde la desventaja**

The literary corpus of the Latina writers I discuss in this dissertation expose the matrix of love. The matrix of love is a set of unspoken rules that regulate how a woman is expected to love and relate to others intimately. By exposing the conditions of this matrix of love, I intend to reveal the contradictions that women are socially obligated to inhabit, taking into special consideration how intimate relationships are those where women are most likely to experience interpersonal violence.

Art always precedes history. Just as Jules Verne conceived of the outrageous idea of going to the moon, exploring the ocean in a submarine or traveling around the Earth in eighty days decades before humans were technologically capable of those feats, so too does literature express the future of our politics. Literature functions as a crystal ball, materializing what others only dreamed of, what until then represented a challenge to humanity. Such is the case of Emma Goldman's writing, whose two-volume autobiography *Living My Life* and anarchist magazine *Mother Earth* inspired my research and approach to the literary corpus I now analyze.

Emma Godman emphasized the responsibility we all have to shed light on the political aspects of a woman's private life. Goldman confesses in her autobiography that she was always able to respond with strength and defiance to the overt aspects of political repression but found herself absolutely vulnerable with regard to her intimate relationships. Her vulnerability in this area triggered feelings of fear of abandonment, loss, insufficiency, and made her doubt if she would ever

have a place in society. In Goldman’s writing on Mary Wollstonecraft, she confesses her fear of displacement in the future as an old woman, with no one to come home to, no grandchildren or place in society.<sup>1</sup> She expresses how this fear made her cling in desperation to her intimate relationships while simultaneously attempting through her work and advocacy, to re-edit the “family model” for other women. I interpret Goldman’s still relatable experience as an early articulation of “impostor syndrome.”

Candace Falk and Lori Jo Marso are able to see in Goldman’s writings a profound feeling of sadness and despair.<sup>2</sup> While Goldman is adamant about the need for women to build new forms of intimacy, she falls into her own trap; struggling to break the conventional norms of “feminine, gendered, bonds”—that is, monogamous, heterosexual and leading to motherhood—and simultaneously sinking into dependency within the same bonds. As a result of this entrapment, paradoxically, Goldman finds herself unable to maintain any long-lasting loving, intimate relationships. Although Goldman died believing she was not successfully embracing new forms of intimacy in her personal life, today many feminist Latina authors live their personal lives accordingly, and through their writing are able to testify to the price women have had to pay in their fight to shift consciousness. Through this framework, in my dissertation I focus on how contemporary Latina writers contest the modern cultural expressions of intimacy and present characters

<sup>1</sup> See Goldman (1911).

<sup>2</sup> Candace Falk is author of numerous biographies on Goldman, including *Love, Anarchy and Emma Goldman* (1984) and *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years* (2008); she is also the founder and director of the Emma Goldman papers research project. Lori Jo Marso is an historian of feminism and Professor of Political Science, and has published *Fifty-one Key Feminist Thinkers* (2016) and *Simone de Beauvoir’s Political Thinking* (2006), among other texts.

that attempt to reconfigure such bonds. In some cases, as we will see, they are successful, in others, they apparently fail, but never in vain.

From Goldman's writings and the critical readings of the very lucid and inspiring academics Lori Jo Marso and Candace Falk, it's clear that within the anarcho-feminist movement there was disagreement with Goldman's approach to "female liberation." Aside from her well-known efforts to support free love and birth control campaigns, Goldman is also known for having been made an outcast by several other anarchist women who rejected Goldman's ideas about "challenging feminine desire" in everyday life. Goldman made enemies when she tried to convey the idea that women would never be free until they radicalized their intimate relationships. Marso describes it better, writing that, "Goldman was certain of one thing: No true freedom for women could exist without a fundamental revolution at the intimate level between human beings in their relationships of love and sexuality" (Marso 307). The need for the radical critique of intimacy that Goldman proposed almost a century ago is precisely the set of paradoxes that feminist Latinas unravel in their writings today, and that women find themselves mediating in real life. These writers challenge the traditional way they are expected to love—and not only other human beings, but God and other religious figures as well. Love and other affective bonds are cultural expectations and intersect with race, gender, class, and therefore the fight to thrive, to be seen, to be heard, and to feel safe as well.

Goldman insists on bringing to light the inequalities manifested in our most intimate relationships. I argue here that there are a number of unspoken, yet very specific ways a woman is supposed to inhabit those relationships. She is expected to

be a lover, wife, mother, daughter, sister, or even a Catholic. Goldman insists, “a woman clings tenaciously to the home, although it is the same power that holds her bondage” (197). I believe this is a fundamental paradox that stems from the structural position of women around the world. In Latino households in particular, the matrilineal structure establishes women’s central place in the nuclear family. In the nuclear family, the mother is a sanctified figure who *must* sacrifice herself for the wellbeing of others. Most Latinas in United States statistically self-identify as practicing Catholics.<sup>3</sup> Thus, to clarify the possible origins of a gendered dogmatic ideology, I will dive into the exploration of Catholic representation of motherhood in the iconography of the Holy Trinity. I will do this by analyzing the specific role of the Virgin Mary through the lens of Julia Kristeva and her historical findings on the concept of *Stabat Mater*. In this way, I aim to expose how female authors dare to reconfigure the role of the sorrowful mother within the literary corpus I selected, and to acknowledge the importance of the work Latinas are currently doing through their writing.

The reader should be aware of the fact that I am deeply inspired by the philosophical and creative work of women like Cherríe Moraga, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, Carla Trujillo, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Dolores Prida and Evangelina Vigil. Their ideas permeate every idea I have and every sentence I write. They have decolonized brown/female bodies, Mexican myths, queerness, female desire, racial and regional displacement. Moreover, they have rescued historic female figures from the oblivion that Eurocentric history, politics

<sup>3</sup> See Pew *Religious Landscape Study*.

and ideology have consigned them to, inaugurating a turning point in the humanities. The aforementioned theorists have deconstructed the stories we tell and have been taught to retell about so-called bad women like La Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, La Llorona, Sor Juana. These theorists have taught us, changing the narrative, that these women have been violated and silenced; that these figures are transgressive female bodies. Today, these writers' work is the foundation, and marks a call for action for the millennial generation. Now it is our turn to create new models of consciousness. I conceive my writing here as a way to think through the ideas that what Moraga, Anzaldúa and other courageous feminist Latinas have given us on a smaller level. Their work is so strong and significant for my generation that it has become, at times, overwhelming to do justice to their ideas. Hence, I reduce my task to the microscopic level in order to analyze the subtleties of the mechanisms of female oppression within the Latina experience unveiled by the previous generation.

For these reasons, my efforts will focus, as previously mentioned, on the private spheres: the affective and familiar bonds of love and intimacy portrayed by Cherríe Moraga in her play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, Helena María Viramontes in her novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* and three poems by Chicana Lesbians: *I believe en la Mujer* by Cathy Arrellano, *deseo* by Karen T. Delgadillo and *From between Our Legs* by Natashia Lopez. I will focus on the construction of the female characters that exhibit a correlation to Goldman's project and the need for it to become a reality. Latina writers' creative endeavors are clear evidence of a

new feminist wave that focuses on the personal and intimate aspects of women's experience, because as we know, *lo personal es político*—the personal is political.



## Chapter I: *Under the feet of Jesus* by Helena María Viramontes

### The Birth of a New Messiah: The Reconfiguration of God, Sacrifice and Love

*Under the Feet of Jesus* is a novel in five chapters by the Chicana writer Helena María Viramontes. The novel was published in 1995 by Plume—a United States publisher—and tells the story of a migrant Latino family working in the grape fields of California. Composed of thirteen-year-old Estrella, her mother Petra and her younger siblings Ricky, Arnulfo and twin toddler sisters Perla and Cookie, as well as Petra's much older boyfriend, Perfecto Flores, the family struggles to stay together and make ends meet. The novel has a strong focus on the experiences of the female characters and their memories of paternal and spousal abandonment and survival as *piscadores* in labor camps, harvesting fruit on different farms around the United States. Viramontes' descriptions of the magnificent *paisajes*—these, located in both the United States and Mexico—stand in stark contrast to the life of the migrants, which she narrates as plagued by struggle, hardship and inhumane conditions. One of the most piercing elements of her writing resides in the way she is able to shift the focus of the narrative between characters, even though she uses the structure of an omniscient narrator and very little dialogue to carry this story. Each character's emotional life is constructed through potent imagery and poignant fragments from their recollections of the past and their most intimate thoughts, as delivered by the omniscient narrator. *Under the Feet of Jesus* relies on symbolism pulled from the Mexican Catholic tradition to reconfigure the ideas of God, sacrifice and love in a post-second-wave and migrant context.

In this chapter, I argue that the matrix of love that I see across Latina literary works in Emma Goldman's wake, in this novel, is characterized by the absence, decadence or unreliability of male characters. To do this, I read passages closely throughout the novel to establish how Petra—the mother—presumes that her daughter, Estrella, will fall into the same cycle of sacrifice in response to male characters' actions as she did. Moreover, I will show how in constantly searching for a man and God to save her and her family, Petra ignores her own embodiment of the power of God and Estrella's power to break the cycle.

*Under the Feet of Jesus* is Viramontes' first novel. She had previously published a collection of short stories, *The Moths and Other Stories*, in 1985, and would go on to write and publish *Their Dogs Came With Them* in 2007. A writer and academic, her literary work has been published in a number of US Spanish-language and Chicano publications, including Arte Público Press and ChismeArte. However, as an academic, she has worked in English and Creative Writing programs, although publishing on Latino Studies and issues. All of Viramontes' writing focuses on Chicana and Mexican-American women's experience in California. Whereas *Under the Feet of Jesus* discusses the rural farm workers' experience, *Their Dogs Came with Them* is more autobiographical in the sense that it draws from Viramontes' own childhood in East Los Angeles.

Numerous scholars have written about Viramontes' work, and on *Under the Feet of Jesus* in particular. In Molly Freitas' "Jesu Crista: Symbol for a Just Future in Helena María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*", Dennis López, "'You talk 'merican?': Class, Value, and the Social Production of Difference in Helena María

Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*", David James Vázquez' "Their Bones Kept Them Moving: Latinx Studies, Helena María Viramontes's 'Under the Feet of Jesus,'" and Lydia R. Cooper's "'Bone, Flesh, Feather and Fire': Symbol as Freedom in Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*." However, I do not find in their work an analysis of the affective bonds between the characters, nor the revolutionary way the protagonist inhabits such relationships.

In what follows, I will make evident that the matrix of love determines the fact that Estrella, the daughter, struggles over whether to follow the cultural expectations of feminine sexuality in being loved and relating in intimate ways to men and God in the ways that her mother does, or to rebel against them. I will establish the symbolism present in the fact that Petra sees her daughter at the brink of womanhood—Estrella has not yet menstruated nor has had sexual relations. I interpret this symbolism as precisely the mechanism that gives Estrella the option to subvert her mother's ways. Although Estrella has not established any sexually intimate bonds with a man, she displays clear forms of both sexual tension and attraction towards the character of Alejo. At the same time, she experiences a constant *distanciamiento* (in the Brechtian sense of *Verfremdung*) from men, God, and even from the representation of the Virgin Mary and the Virgin of Guadalupe. I seek to make evident that Viramontes writes a character on the brink of deciding whether to perpetuate the matrix of love and the culturally performative reiteration of the *Stabat Mater*, or to challenge it. I show that Estrella's ability arrive at such a tipping point is only possible through her rejection of her mother's relationship with God.

The importance of Viramontes' novel lies in how she represents Estrella as a fracture in the patriarchy as she takes a different path to becoming a woman. Viramontes' masterful writing is evident in many ways. However, one of the most piercing elements of her writing resides in the way she is able to shift the focus of the narrative between characters. Each character's emotional life is constructed through potent imagery and poignant fragments from their recollections of the past and their most intimate thoughts, as delivered by the omniscient narrator. For Viramontes, taking this path depends—echoing Goldman—on a radical shift in the way women are expected to love and be loved, their sacrifice and their dependence on God being part of this equation. I will shed light on this alternate path by contrasting Petra's reactions and recollections versus her daughter's as the same episodes from the past recur in the present. In doing so, I will establish how Estrella's character is presented at the end of the novel as the embodiment of a new church—the incarnation of Goldman's ideals.<sup>4</sup>

### **He Has Abandoned Us**

The novel opens with the narrator presenting Estrella and her family arriving, after a very long drive, at a bungalow close to an abandoned barn within the confines of a grape farm. The narrator simultaneously presents two adolescent cousins, the sixteen-year-old Alejo and fifteen-year-old Gumecindo; the cousins peek out from a peach orchard where they are stealing fruit to sell at the market as they watch Estrella and her family settle into their new life. The narrator immediately shifts to Estrella's perspective in order to describe the reason the

<sup>4</sup> See Goldman (1913).

family is there, which takes the reader into Estrella's memories of her father's abandonment—the first of many instances of male abandonment in *Under the Feet of Jesus* counterpointed by the absence of God.

As the family arrives at the bungalow by the grape fields, Estrella reminisces about the past. She remembers how her father would take the whole family to work in the orange fields. She recalls the words of the other women in the camp and as her godmother's voice dissuading Petra, her mother, from leaving her husband and running away with the children. This gives the reader some open background to the kind of man Estrella's father was. The voices of other women, visually marked in italics, advise Petra that, "To run away from your husband would be a mistake." They tell Petra that if she were to run away with the children, her husband would stalk them and find them, "not because he wanted them back, they proposed, but because it was a slap in the face, and he would swear over the seventh beer that he would find her and kill them all" (13). The women know how things work in their community: a woman cannot abandon a man. The act of leaving a man is interpreted as "a slap in the face," as a symbol of defiance, a threat and a mockery to the man's power and control.

Estrella embodies a radical shift in the way a woman is expected to love and establish intimate emotional bonds, especially in the context of a conservative and religious Catholic Latino family. Estrella's intimate relationships are portrayed as a complete disruption of the status quo by her conscious actions and not only her desires or her *fluir psíquico*. Considering that the novel is written through an

omniscient narrator, the narration serves as an intermediary between the reader and the characters who have no voice in their own country.

Female voices construct Estrella's understanding of masculinity; in her memories they explain the type of man her father was: someone to be feared and never challenged, like the Judaic God from the Old Testament. These voices speak of him as if he, like God, were allowed to decide who lives and dies. Estrella's godmother says as much but goes even further by shedding light on a woman's place in their community. She says, "You'll be a forever alone woman, nobody wants a woman with a bunch of orphans, nobody. You don't know what hunger is until your *huercos* tell you to your face, then what you gonna do?" (13). For Estrella's godmother, Petra's path toward the least amount of suffering and destruction would be to endure life with her husband. Women are never allowed to leave their husbands, and if they do, are seen as pariahs, as if they are carrying a disease—no other man would want to come near them. To Estrella's godmother, the idea of Petra providing for her children by herself seems like an impossibility. If Petra leaves her husband, her children would starve to death. From this passage, the reader is left free to speculate on the reasons behind Petra's yearning to leave her husband—they go unmentioned here. However, immediately following this passage, the story takes an unexpected turn: "Instead, it was her father who'd run away, gone to Mexico, her mother said at first, to bury an uncle" (14).

These events occur in the past time of the novel, back when Estrella's father moved the family to the city, getting a new apartment with the hope of starting a new life in a permanent home: "hoping to never see a field again" (14). Yet, the

father leaves them there. Estrella only remembers the striking images of her mother's desperation and erratic behavior from this period in time. She remembers her mother's efforts to get her husband back to the US, and her father's excuses over supposed "problems at the border." Later in the novel, via Petra's memories, these "problems" are revealed to be fabrications. Following father's abandonment of the family, Estrella remembers her mother spending the majority of the time kneeling and praying, slamming doors, shutting herself in the bathroom, and receiving long distance calls from her father asking Petra to send him more money. Estrella's father's constant demands, even in his abandonment stretch his family even more thin, leaving them without food. If we take Petra's godmother's words into account, this is a sort of reverse prophecy. Disaster and hunger strike the family due to the parents' separation. However, in this case, even though Petra is not in control of their split, she ultimately pays the price. Eventually Estrella remembers how they returned to the fields, leaving the apartment in the city at night and moving first to her godmother's home and then back to the fields.

What fascinates me here is the period of latency between her father's abandonment and the moment when Estrella realizes her father is never coming back. The narrator tells the reader more about what Estrella *sees* and less of what she *feels*: "Estrella would never know of the father's disappearance. Never know if he thought of them as the mother did of him. She could only see it in the wet stone of the mother's eyes" (14). Although Estrella can see her mother's hopes and dreams of her father's return in her eyes, to Estrella, the realization that her father is not coming back strikes her only with a temperate sense of acceptance and

resignation. Interestingly, the narrator describes Estrella's realization as a beautiful and progressive enlightenment. The narrator speaks of the scent of freshness and real hope, comparing Estrella's realization to the morning light that takes away the darkness: "It didn't happen so fast, the realization that he was not coming back [...] Like morning light, passing, the absence of night, just there, his not returning" (14).

Immediately after the last description, a sudden time shift brings the reader back to the present, at the precise moment Estrella is scolded by Perfecto, who finds her at the barn. This moment is not gratuitous. Perfecto, the "new man" who took her father's place, is presented literally scolding Estrella, telling her where she can and cannot be, diminishing her. In one passage, Estrella and her siblings snoop around inside the barn—a powerful metaphor I will come back to—when Perfecto finds them, he says to Estrella: "You have no business being in the barn [...] Are you blind? Can't you see the walls are ready to collapse, you could've hurt the girls [...] Go help your mom" (15). Estrella defies Perfecto's apparently paternal role as a savior when she does not confront him directly but is red with anger, bites her lip and stomps away; her brother Ricky asks for her not to be mad, to which she replies, "He's not my papa" (16).

This brief moment in the present is a short ellipsis for the narrator to shift back to the past, to exactly the same period detailed before through Estrella's perspective. However, this time, the reader is able to peek into the exact same decisive moment from the mother's point of view. Petra reminisces on how Estrella's "real father" (12), as the narrator refers to him, is sitting down, tying his shoelaces, while Petra runs her fingers along his backbone "until he stood up and



walked out.” Immediately after, we are presented with Petra’s thoughts: she is almost jealous of his nerve to just walk away, only to leave behind false stories of his whereabouts: “the lies, stacked like the bills she kept in a shoe box” (17). Despite all the stories and lies her husband told her, Petra does the same to Estrella, “Petra lied to Estrella because she shouldn’t know her father evicted all of them from the vacancy of his heart [...] she realized that truth was only a lesser degree of lies. Was it he who had the nerve to disappear as if his life belonged to no one but him?” (17). This last question is evidently a rhetorical one, but from it arises Petra’s disbelief, denial and perhaps a hint of jealousy at *his* freedom and at her own *lack* of freedom. His life is only his, but what of Petra’s? Her life belongs to everyone but herself. Petra hides in the bathroom for days, praying and passing beads from the rosary through her fingers. She is depicted almost as blind or completely disassociated, as her only references to time are through sounds: “Only noises hinted another life: a neighbor dragged a trash can out to the curb (morning); a toilet flushed (someone is home from work) ; the twins crying (mealtime) cars scratching with murderous brakes...” (17).

As Petra suffers the end of her marriage, in the meantime, Estrella takes care of all the children. Her mother hides in the bathroom, obsessively biting the flesh of her thumb, tearing it apart until she hears the babies bang against a tin bucket with wooden spoons. She bursts out of the bathroom with her hands covering her ears as she screams to the children: “Stop it, stop it, stop it! (18)”. The children, obviously frightened, hide and cry under the box spring; but Estrella stands between the children and her mother saying “You, *you* stop it, Mama! Stop this now!” Here,

Estrella clearly takes on a maternal role by taking care of the children while Petra is overwhelmed by the abandonment of her husband to the point of collapse, unable to take action. There is no money and no food, but to keep her siblings from crying out of fear and hunger, Estrella dances and sings while tapping on an empty can of Quaker's Oatmeal, smacking the old white man's face. This moment could refer to the origin of their situation as an oppressed minority within American patriarchal society, but in the novel's imagination represents Estrella's taking on a matriarchal role in her mother and father's absence. Although the character can seem, at this moment, trapped into a role that is thrust upon her by the absence of both parents, she will later on reject this position, as the narrator will point out in the following chapters how Estrella will soon refuse the sacrificial embodiment of motherhood (see "The weight on Women's Work" in this chapter).<sup>5</sup>

Instead of coming back to her senses, Petra, in a true act of desperation, storms out of the apartment and into the highway.<sup>6</sup> In an apparent suicide attempt, Petra runs with her rosary in hand to the intersection. From her own account, she

<sup>5</sup> I also could not help but think about Mary Dyer here. Some scholars believe that Dyer had a major influence on the first amendment of the American Constitution. Mary Dyer, an English puritan who moved to Boston escaping persecution by the Church of England was exiled to Rhode Island because of her alliance with Anne Hutchinson who claimed God communicates equally with men and women when at the time, women were not allowed to preach or discuss the Bible. After her exile, Mary Dyer went back to England where she became a Quaker and then went back to Boston in an attempt to save the women and men whom had their ears and tongue cut out by the Puritans, and was imprisoned, whipped topless and branded with the letter "B" for blasphemy. Dyer—now a Quaker—returned to Massachusetts claiming, on top of the notion that men and women stood equal ground in church, worship and organization, preached "the inner light," referring to how the Holy Spirit talks to each person individually and not through men in power. Her claims for free religious consciousness after being spared of death once, enraged the puritans and she was finally hanged. Perhaps this image of Estrella banging the face of the Quaker man from the Oatmeal also makes reference to the strength and resilience, even in the face of death, that Quaker women had to have in order to change religion and be heard.

<sup>6</sup> This moment recalls an earlier scene when they first arrive to the apartment in which Petra acknowledges the dangerous speed of cars.

positions herself in this dangerous place in order to find “someone” to help her get back. Viramontes relies heavily on metaphor to describe the solitude and the feelings of abandonment that overpower Petra:

Petra broke, her mouth a cut jagged line. She bolted out of the apartment, pounded down the plaster stairs through the parking lot and out into the streets and ran some more. She stalled on the boulevard intersection divide and waited for the cars to stop, waited for him, for anyone, to guide her across the wide pavement; but the beads rolled on, fast howling shrieks of sharp silver pins just inches away from her. Petra inspected her hands, remembering how their bodies were once like two fingers crisscrossing for good luck. Blood was crusting on the dots of her self-inflicted bite. The endless swift wind slapped against her face. The twins so hungry and her feet too heavy, too heavy to lift. Echoes of voices, shouts of anger, threats of some kind she could barely hear over the blasting horns [...] and then she remembered her eldest daughter Estrella trying to feed the children with noise, pounding her feet, drumming her hand and dancing loca to no music at all, dancing loca with the full empty Quaker man. (20)

With the image of her own daughter’s strength in her mind, and in the absence of God, or a man, or anyone else to help her, Petra regains the power in her feet to go back to her children, repeating to herself “one foot up, one foot down.” She adds, “no more dancing with the full empty Quaker man” (20). As we can see, even in the most dangerous and erratic of Petra’s episodes no husband, no man, no God, but instead the revindicating force of her own daughter comes to her rescue. Through

Estrella's reminiscences about the same episode, the reader can finally make sense of Petra's solitude. Despite Petra's abandonment, she continues to devote herself and sacrifice herself for her family.

### **Where is Perfecto?**

The narrator then brings us back to the present, to an episode that might have the reader question Petra's loneliness. Perfecto is in their lives.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, despite Perfecto's apparent presence, throughout the novel the phrase, "Where is Perfecto?" is repeated continually. Uttered more than five times both by Petra and Estrella, Perfecto's presence in the novel is, in fact, characterized by his many kinds of absence. Although Petra continually thinks and says that, "He'll be back," hoping for the return of his protection and affection, ultimately Petra and Estrella are the only ones to protect themselves—even in Perfecto's presence.

Where is Perfecto, then? As his name might suggest, on the surface Perfecto Flores seems to be perfect. Petra is not only in love with Perfecto but is also secretly pregnant with his child. He has accompanied Petra and the children to work at various vegetable farms and owns a toolbox that, according to Petra, can fix anything. Estrella's relationship with Perfecto, however, is more complicated. At first, she resents him for knowing something that she does not: how to use the toolbox and all of the tools within it. Her resentment for Perfecto later on shifts as Estrella learns how to use the tools by watching Perfecto. The narrator explains: "that was the day Estrella decided to learn how to read," symbolizing the utilitarian power of language. Nevertheless, she does not fully trust him.

<sup>7</sup> Perfecto's his name references a job well done, as he is known to be a good handyman.

The second time Estrella asks, “Where is Perfecto?” (41) her mother answers, “He’ll be back.” Estrella is aware that it is late in the day, and that her mother is tired after her work in the fields and then the washing, cleaning, cooking and baths for the children. The narrator tells us that her varicose veins strain from her efforts. Still, after all of her labors, Petra leaves the house to mark an oval in the dirt around the bungalow with a stick. By making this oval to stop the scorpions from coming inside, Petra, once again tries to protect her family. Estrella, seeing her mother, takes over, taking the stick from her mother’s hand and retracing the line “for a deeper more definitive oval” (42). Here we see Estrella taking over for her mother by taking on her responsibilities and preoccupations. Yet, as the narrator explains, Estrella does not always question the logic behind her mother’s actions: “The mother believed scorpions instinctively scurried away from lines that had no opening or closing. Estrella never questioned whether this was true or not” (42). Meanwhile, as Estrella takes over the stick to draw the oval around the bungalow, Petra tells her, “Perfecto killed a *niño de tierra*,” as if to defend his absence and to justify their own actions to protect the house. Although Perfecto might indeed have killed a scorpion—the reader is invited to trust her words—his absence begs many questions. Where is the man that Petra thinks she needs? Who is physically guarding the home? Who is symbolically keeping the space safe, and keeping vigil when the kids are asleep?

When Estrella finishes retracing the line, she asks her mother to come back inside. “In a minute,” Petra replies, to which Estrella, baffled at her mother’s tenacity, asks, “Don’t you ever get tired?” Her question is never answered; Petra

only replies, “And?” Petra then “turns to study the daughter and return to her accustomed vigil,” and carries on singing, “*Ojalá Dios lo permita, pa’ estrecharte entre mis brazos.*” (42) The narrator tells the reader that, as Petra sings, she thinks about how she wishes her children could stay innocent and honest, but knows that she has pushed them to mature for their own safety. The narrator also tells us that Petra worryingly “watches her daughter growing right before her eyes” (42). Petra’s answers and non-answers speak volumes about how Petra thinks of her own situation, as well as the kind of ideology operating in the social space of the novel. Petra feels that she is not even allowed to say “yes” when asked if she is tired; she can hardly conceive of the possibility of the opposite, as if the question itself were absurd.

Although the narrator allows the reader to see into Petra and Perfecto’s intimacy, the reader is only able to perceive Perfecto’s absence—even while present—and rejection of Petra’s embrace in bed. Perfecto’s character, throughout the entirety of the novel is portrayed daydreaming, staring into empty space. By the second half of the book, the narrator lets the reader know where Perfecto’s mind wanders to—Perfecto yearns to go “back home” (166) where he has another family. Perfecto replays the memories of a woman named Mercedes, who he is still in love with but never married, and with whom he had a child that died shortly after birth. When Perfecto is offered money to tear down the barn, Perfecto’s ache for going “back home” takes over, putting the family in danger. As Perfecto is not as strong as he used to be, he asks Estrella for help, arguing that the money earned from the barn’s demolition would go to Petra and the kids. Estrella, doubtful, dares to ask,

“Why tear it down? I thought I had no business in the barn, Estrella replied. She walked over to its shade. I thought you said it was dangerous” (73). Estrella knows something is off and questions his decision to ask her and not Alejo or his cousin Gumecindo for help. Perfecto answers, “I gotta pay them. Less [money] for your mama” (74). Estrella is not completely aware that Perfecto is trying to manipulate her. In reality, and despite his promises, he is eager to get the money in order to abandon Petra and return home and to Mercedes: “He didn’t want to waste what little time he had left. With or without Estrella’s help, he committed himself to tearing the barn down. The money was essential to get home before home became so distant; he wouldn’t be able to remember his way back.” (83) Yet Estrella sees what her mother cannot, could not: she senses the hidden economy behind every affective bond. Estrella refuses to help Perfecto, thinking of the barn as an analogy: “Is that what happens? Estrella thought, people just use you until you’re all used up, then rip you into pieces when they’re finished using you?” (75).

### **The Weight of Women’s Work**

Viramontes’ novel makes men’s absence particularly evident, especially given women’s continued presence in places that are associated with men. Women in the fields do the same jobs as the male *piscadores*, but on top of the work under sun, they literally bear the weight of their children. There is a particular instance in the novel, before Alejo gets sick, where Estrella finds herself hanging out after work with the rest of the *piscadores* gathered around a truck and drinking beer before heading back to the camps. Although the flirtation and sexual tension between her and Alejo is obvious, Estrella cannot help but wonder, why is she the only woman

there? And where are the rest of the women? She soon realizes there is no leisure time for women in the camps: they are taking care of the children from absent men. Estrella remembers when she was a toddler and her own mother tried to keep her awake as she worked in the cotton fields. Now, in the novel's present tense, she sees the extra weight she represented to her mother:

Estrella remembered the mother trying to keep her awake, but the days were so hot, and the sun wanted her to sleep so badly, she became cranky and angry. Finally, the mother gave in, laid a four-year -old Estrella right on top of her bag of cotton, hushing her to sleep and Estrella never realized the added weight she must have been on the mother's shoulders as she dragged the bag slowly between the rows of cotton plants. (67)

Although Estrella realizes she slept peacefully surrounded by cotton and was soothed by her mother's repetitive pull on the plants, she is now aware of her mother's strength and endurance through their life in that rusty bungalow, feeding the kids, bathing them, preparing lunch, cleaning, washing everyone's clothes, scaring away the scorpions, her belly wrapped tight with a belt so no one notices she is pregnant; vomiting, her veins popping out of her swollen legs and rubbing garlic on them because she cannot afford medication. Petra's legs do not get any rest, *she* does not get any rest. As if this was not enough, Petra keeps vigil while she waits for her man. In the meantime, Perfecto is still absent, and Estrella keeps asking her mom, "Aren't you tired mama?"

We can witness a shift in the way the Petra and Estrella carry the weight of the children and the absence of men. These affective bonds are reconfigured by



Estrella when the narrator again describes—as in Chapter One—two contrasting points of view of the same event: the day Petra’s husband and Estrella’s father’s left. The same narratological strategy is used to counterpoint the burden of the children in the fields. Whereas Petra carries young Estrella along the fields while she sleeps, dragging around the weight of the harvest and the child, Estrella takes a different approach when facing the exact same situation. Immediately after Estrella recalls herself as child being a burden to her mother, in the present time, Estrella’s brother Rick finds her row in the grape fields. Then the narrator describes Ricky looking feverish and Estrella feeling exhausted from the sun and a sore hip from carrying a basket full of grapes all day, her body in excruciating pain every time she has to stand up and move on to cut the next set of grapes. She is in agony, just as her mother is in the flashback. However, her reaction towards the little feverish child she loves in front of her is not the same as her mother’s.

Estrella marks a difference between herself and her mother by making herself a priority. She asks Rick, “Where is your hat and where is Arnulfo and Perfecto Flores anyway.” As we can see, she first denounces the absence of the older sibling and the father figure. Then she decides not to repeat the mother’s behavior by deciding not to bring Ricky along, putting him in the basket or carrying him on her back, as her mother had with her. Instead, she decides to leave Ricky under the shade and carry on, telling her younger brother, “No sense walking home when the sun is the meanest. You don’t know how to work with the sun yet, she told him, and she set him down under the vines. Sit until you hear the trucks honking, go that way, okay? Estrella turned and pointed, but her eyes fell on the flatbeds of

grapes she had lined carefully.” (87). Estrella tells herself, “Don’t cry,” but by doing exactly the opposite to what her mother did for her when she was a child, although painful, it is necessary. Ultimately, Estrella finds the courage to do so without crying, letting herself feel the pain her mother would not. Estrella reverts her mother’s paradigm.

### **Alejo**

As I have argued above, Estrella manages to revert her mother’s obliviousness of her relationship with men. This reversal of the status quo is even more poignant in Alejo and Estrella’s relationship. Alejo flirts with Estrella several times throughout the novel. At one point the narrator tells the reader that Alejo’s jeans feel tight as he gets an erection while he talks to Estrella. Estrella subtly responds to Alejo’s flirtatiousness a few times, but she ultimately blocks his attempts to get close to her both physically and emotionally, even though she is attracted to him (90). Alejo’s character is similar to those of Estrella and Petra in the sense that he was abandoned by his father and raised by his grandmother—he is also dealing with the absence of a paternal figure. Now his father is dead, but his grandmother is the only one continuously feeding Alejo with the idea that the fields must not be a job he should do forever, that instead he should study. Alejo’s grandmother says that he comes from a line of smart people, although not like his father: “Alejo’s grandmother had reassured him; he came from a long line of intelligent people, not like his *cabeza de burro* father, God rest his stupid soul; seize the chance to make something of yourself in this great and true country” (80). The only support that Alejo has ever received has come from his grandmother, as well as

his ideas of the American dream, attending high school and one day becoming a geologist. Further on in the novel, Estrella allows Alejo to get close to her, letting him kiss her hand and lay close to her, but ultimately, she blocks any further physical advances. However, Alejo soon gets sick; the young man is poisoned by pesticides sprayed onto the fields and becomes unable to become a positive and truly present male figure for Estrella. Instead, Estrella and her mother will be the ones taking care of him during his illness, his symptoms so extreme that they are described as lethal.

The key in the reconfiguration of affective bonds in Viramontes' novel, starts, just as with Goldman's call to action, with an actual differentiation between rethinking and (re)enacting. Just as Goldman hoped for in her writing, Viramontes has Estrella establish a clear overview of normalized inaction from the oppressed as early as the first chapter. When the family first arrives at the Bungalow, Alejo and his cousin bring to Petra and her family a bag of stolen peaches. The very brief dialogue between Petra and Estrella comprises the core of the novel that echoes Emma Goldman's writing:

Estrella flipped her long black hair to the side and bit the peach with a deep ravenous bite. —Don't let them see you take the fruit, Estrella warned, licking a finger that dripped with sweet juice. The skin between her thick eyebrows gathered into a thunderbolt when she bit again. —For the pay we get, they're lucky we don't burn the orchards down. This came from the mother. —No sense talking tough unless you do it, replied Estrella. (45)

The differences between Estrella and her mother can be summarized in that last phrase, “no case talking tough unless you do it.” First Petra *thinks* about leaving her husband, but she does not act, instead the husband leaves. Second, Petra *tries* to cope with the abandonment but is unable to do so, therefore her daughter takes over the role of taking care of the children. Third, Estrella questions constantly, “Where is Perfecto?” and “Don’t you get tired, mama?” She even goes so far as to acknowledge there would be more for them without Perfecto; during one of the many nights when she asks her mother about his whereabouts, Estrella states “If Perfecto doesn’t come back, we can eat the melon in the morning,” (41) just as she acknowledged before (when her father left) life without him felt “like a new beginning.” However, Petra’s still believes in Perfecto, just as she believed that her husband would return. She believes she needs a man in her life, even if it only means an extra weight and worry: “He’ll be back, the mother replied” (41), unaware of Perfecto’s plan to leave her.

Another important contrast resides in the fear Petra has for the rest of the men. To her, men would unavoidably impregnate young girls, therefore, women must remain indoors after dark. Petra does not want that for Estrella, and yells at her for staying out late with Alejo and the other *piscadores* afterwork. For Petra, such consequences like pregnancy are unavoidable, in the sense that it is unavoidable to fall in love with a man and let him take over her body, impregnate her and then leave; exactly as Estrella’s father did and Perfecto does (69). However, Petra’s warning is constructed with very few words. She says, “... or what do you want, an *hijo sin labios?*” (22). She uses this metaphor for the kind of damnation she sees in

the *piscador* community of having no voice in their own country, to describe how Estrella is not in control of her body and feelings. In a literal sense, as well, Petra refers to the fact that more children in the camps are born with cleft palates because of the pesticides which they are exposed to, maternal malnutrition, as well as the extreme work conditions that mothers endure.

What Petra does not know is that her daughter is better at staying away from the affective and sexual bonds than she ever was. As we are told in the first chapter, when Petra gets pregnant with Estrella, and later married to Estrella's father, she begs the office clerk to change the date on the marriage certificate so no one can find out she was pregnant out of wedlock. Here, we can understand that Petra's sense of validation, even though she is now thirty-five years old, comes from the Catholic ideology of the sanctity of marriage and virginhood. This ideology dictates that men and women alike must respect the sanctity of marriage and not sin by having sex before they wed. In practice, men are able to freely fulfill and express their sexual desire without stigma or repercussions, whereas women must be both the incarnation of the virgin and the mother, the sacrifice and the sorrow.

In her essay "Stabat Mater," Julia Kristeva discusses the 13<sup>th</sup> century Christian hymn to Mary's suffering as the Mother of Christ during the crucifixion. She reflects on the hymn's first verse, "Stabat Mater dolorosa," meaning "the sorrowful mother was standing," considering that the Christian system of religious belief enforces and rewards the role of a woman who must withstand adversity without questioning it (like Mary, mother of Christ). By urging her daughter to stay in at night, Petra attempts to put a stop to, or at least postpone, the cycle of the

sorrowful mother. Nevertheless, Petra sees this cycle as an inescapable “part of being a woman.”

Estrella, however, is already shifting such paradigms. For instance, Petra decides to take Alejo into her home when he is at his sickest and believed to be close to death from pesticide intoxication. The text beautifully extracts the love and care of a mother that expands to all children, not only her own, and Petra’s deep understanding of the Christian message of love and care for *el prójimo*. For Viramontes, apparently, only a mother can embody this love, as Perfecto tries to dissuade her from taking care of the dying young man:

—He is sick, Petra. Sicker than any yerba, any prayer could cure.

—It’s not good to leave people behind.

—I feel it in my bones.

—You can’t even stand up, Perfecto continued, punctuating the fact with a trembling wave of one big hand.

He glanced at her veins which bubbled thicker into a color of a deep bruise when she stood on her feet too long.

—What makes you think you can help him?

—What makes you think I can’t?

—You have enough in your hands.

—If Arnulfo or Ricky or my hija got sick, I would want someone to take care of them, wouldn’t you?

—This is different, Perfecto said lowering his voice.

—How? How is it different than us?

—It's too much, he answered, too much.

—One never knows what obstacles God puts us before us as a test.

—A test? Perfecto asked incredulously. The coffee overboiled and signed in flames.

—You know what I mean.

—You're crazy, I tell you.

—Petra stood up. With the corner of her apron, she wrapped the handle of the coffee pot and removed it from the fire.

—Perfecto shook his head repeatedly.

—I can't allow it.

—It's not in our hands.

—I can't allow it.

He noticed a puncture in the ribbed clouds which floated right toward him. For a moment, he felt as if the hand of God was going to reach right through the hole and pull him up to the heavens. He glanced down and the maggots looked like white specks against the chocolate soil. His chest ached.

—Not now, he pleaded, not now.

—What's the matter with you?

—Tell me to go to the devil, Petra replied, tell me I'm crazy. But don't tell me that. Don't tell me I can't.

Petra ambled to the crate and sat a second time and soothed the apron on her lap and X-ed her arms over her chest, like two planks boarding up a window. (98)

This long quote shows the third time in the novel that Perfecto calls Petra “crazy.” Petra accepts it, but completely blocks the idea of Perfecto ordering her not to help another child. This is her only act of defiance in the novel, and she literally has to make the sign of the cross to keep her ground. Perfecto wishes that Petra would not help, that she would leave Alejo to die. Yet he knows that only *she* will be the one taking care of the sick teenager, repeating, “you can’t” instead of “we can’t.” Perfecto’s desire to evade the situation is expressed through his feeling that God might pull him into heaven, as in a *deus ex machina* where he would not have to deal with the realities and suffering that Petra recognizes as part of her lot in life. A few paragraphs after this dialogue, the narrator states that Perfecto is scared of Petra knowing what is on his mind, his longing for *his* family and *his* dead child and his child’s mother—as well as his plans to go back to them. Petra’s act of defiance ultimately costs her future with Perfecto.

After Alejo moves into Petra and her family’s bungalow, Petra and Perfecto sleep together on the floor with just a sheet dividing the room; Alejo, Estrella and the children sleep all smashed against each other on the other side. Viramontes, through the narrator, describes with mastery Petra’s perspective on what happens on both sides of the sheet. The morning after Alejo’s arrival, Petra tries to cuddle with Perfecto while listening to Alejo talk to Estrella, asking her such questions as if working on the fields was everything she wished to do with her life. Petra finds



Alejo's questions ungrateful, given that, if not for her daughter's work, Alejo would not have anything to eat. Alejo delicately flirts with Estrella, asking her if she thinks he is handsome. Estrella rejects Alejo's advances, replying, "I better get up" (84). Alejo answers, "Wait, wait, I wish I could spend the whole day with you and talk about everything under the sky. I mean it." Estrella, about to get up for the day, instead asks Alejo if he had any dreams the night before. After some exchange of words, Alejo tells Estrella, "Let me hold you." This moment serves as a catalyst for Petra to acknowledge what she fears the most: for history to repeat itself as her daughter becomes a woman, and for Estrella to follow in her steps by falling in love and being possessed by a man. Interestingly enough, Petra sees this becoming a woman as an unavoidable curse, but this process has a clear before and after, as if the present and past were divided by the blue sheet. On her side of the sheet Petra, now pregnant with Perfecto's baby, finds rejection; on the other side, the enticement from a young man to her daughter:

Petra heard the shifting of bodies. Was Estrella squeezing against Alejo, as she was doing with Perfecto? Petra stared at the sheet. How blind could she have been? Hadn't she learned something in her thirty-five years? Is this being what it was all about, healing Alejo so that he could take Estrella? She urged her hips against Perfecto's buttocks, then ran her arm under his and let it rest over the breadth of his belly. She felt as if she held nothing, his body like a phantom of a man once made of healthy flesh [...] Petra felt Perfecto touch her hand with his big parchment fingers and she found the gesture tender. Love, Petra knew, came and went. But it was loyalty that kept them

on the tightrope together when it was gone, kept them from seeing the void beneath their feet. (118)

By touching Perfecto's skin, Petra shifts her thinking into to a more optimistic view about men, love and partnership. However, by feeling Perfecto's hand touch hers, she also pauses her fear of what awaits Estrella as a woman. Petra's train of thought is interrupted when Petra feels how Perfecto only grabs her hand to push it away:

"She felt Perfecto grab her hand if only for a moment, then push it away, in a gesture that was not mean, just definite." Then she hears Alejo repeat his request to Estrella. On the face of it, the rejection Petra receives from Perfecto is the same as the kind Alejo receives from Estrella, yet this does not stop Petra from fearing for her daughter's future as a wife and a lover. After this rejection, Petra repeats the same questions over to herself, showing how she is unable to stop tripping over the same stone of how to keep her daughter from falling into the same cycle. Petra gets out of bed and makes deliberate noises to stop Alejo and Estrella from talking to each other, she reflects:

Each morning she held nothing back. But the day bloomed and time became a tight squeeze of a belt upon a belly. Petra forced herself down the steps. Hadn't she learned anything in her thirty-five years? That her two hands couldn't hold anything back, including time? (119)

Petra feels the pain of being unable to hold her back from becoming a woman. Nevertheless, she cannot imagine how Estrella can differ and already differs from her as a woman. Estrella has never surrendered to Alejos's desires, and in fact, she has always walked away, in the same way she does following the passage quoted

above. In both instances, Estrella literally walks away from Alejo, just as the male characters throughout the novel do to Petra. Petra does not see this, refuses to see this, and instead lingers on her daughter's innocence. This passage, and the morning it describes in the characters' lives, represents the second time Petra scolds Estrella, and follows after the moment I described above when Petra tells Estrella she must never stay out after work with the *piscadores*. Here, she warns her daughter—this time, angrily—when they both get out of bed, “*Así comienza todo.*” Petra continues on, leading Perfecto to say, “You going crazy again, Petra?” (120). Perfecto, once again shows that he does not understand his partner, with this instance marking the third time he calls Petra “crazy.” She is both physically and mentally rejected by him.

Petra's relationship to Estrella is marked by her projections onto her daughter and rooted in the belief that her daughter is her mirror. She believes her daughter is different from her but will ultimately have the same experiences and sorrows as she does. She thinks her daughter will be weak towards men's desires, while she is not being desired by Perfecto; she believes that her daughter will continue to make sacrifices for others. As Alejo's condition worsens, Petra asks herself how long they would be able to afford taking care of him. Despite her every remedy and precaution, Alejo deteriorates and Petra worries. The narrator reminds us again about why Petra took on such responsibility:

Petra took care of Alejo, not because of who he was, but because she was a mother too, and if Estrella was sick, or Ricky and Arnulfo were sick in the piscas, she would want someone to take care of them. And of course, she did

it for the love of God. This, however, was more than she had anticipated, and she just didn't have the strength. Her legs were swelling with varicose veins which ruptured like earthquake fault lines. Remembering Perfecto's withdrawal, she wondered if he thought she had failed somehow. (124)

Every time I read this paragraph—even from the cold analytical perspective of the theories and structures of academia—as a daughter, I cannot help but feel my heart sink. This paragraph reminds me of my own mother, even though her and my experiences are not even close to the marginal and oppressed context that Viramontes' character lives daily. Petra's way of thinking and feeling brings me back to my own childhood. No matter how many times I read this passage, I cannot help but feel sad for my mother. My mother was, and still is, the least of her own priorities. On top of everything else, she has always been chased by guilt. She feels guilty for what she has done and for what she has not done. She has devoted her life to my father's success, to the extent that I do not even have memories of him from my childhood. Her life is filled with worries and preoccupation about absolutely everything, but especially about her children—my brother and me—who are both over thirty years old. Will she ever stop making sacrifices? Will she ever stop being choked by guilt? My mother is a devoted Catholic. I have heard her say she lives her life for and by the love of God, much in the same way as Petra does. She often wonders if she has failed to do enough or if she has disappointed my father or God. And just as Petra does, she helps anyone in need, even before helping herself.

## The Matrix of Love

As I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, I believe that part of the reason why women like Petra, my mother, and many real or fictional Latina mothers may behave this way is partly because of the “matrix of love.” The matrix of love is passed from generation to generation; the patriarchal structure condemns a childless female as a person that cannot fully be a woman, and for that reason has no place in society. In the feminist movement in both Mexico and the United States today, we take to the streets to protest violence against women, having faced such violence ourselves. As mothers like Petra do, we hope for change that can protect future generations that might not even exist yet. The matrix of love stems from dogmatic religious belief systems like Catholicism. Only mothers can understand and embody the limitless aspect of love, the boundless human ability to take care of another life or make the sacrifices one can endure for them. The only humans that can truly understand the love of God are mothers because, as they create life, they incarnate God. However, the dynamics of affection and belief systems such as Catholicism enable mothers and wives to be abused and exploited in every sense. Many of these claims have been argued *ad nauseum* by second-wave feminists and theorists: nevertheless, it’s important to understand how these claims also take shape through fictional texts like Viramontes’, which are able to construct a world, and a character, where these systems are exposed and reversed.

Viramontes exposes that the original Christian sacrifice did not come from Jesus, but from his mother. In reality, God on Earth *is* the mother. The mother protects, feeds, cures and loves like no other. She is the embodiment of the *Padre*

*nuestro* prayer insofar as the only person capable of converting the prayer into performative language is the mother, as Petra does throughout *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Mothers like Petra even protect children that have not been born yet, we see in her defense of her hypothetical grandchild faced with the imagined threat that he would be born with no mouth. Although Viramontes characterizes Petra as a servant to her affective bonds, in an apparent contradiction, Petra actually incarnates what she expects from God.

In contrast, Estrella renounces fully sacrificing herself for the man she loves and for her family. Toward the end of the novel, she breaks a pattern her mother does not even know is possible. When Alejo is on the brink of death, Estrella forces the family to help her drive him to the nearest clinic. The tires get stuck in the muddy road, and the family loses precious time pulling it out before the clinic closes. On their way to the clinic, the truck also runs out of gas, and Perfecto is the only one with money to pay the rest of the way. Estrella urges Perfecto, against his wishes, to get Alejo to the clinic and makes him spend the money he has been saving up to go home. To make matters worse, when the family finally arrives at the clinic, they are humiliated by the attending nurse. The nurse is a white middle-class woman who wears too much perfume and red lipstick, and who represents the apparently liberated woman, whose economic independence allows her to consume the vegetables picked by Estrella and her family, to say nothing of the other trappings of her social class.

The nurse's character represents a glitch in the matrix of love; she subverts the caregiving capacities of a mother and fails to fulfill her professional role as a

nurse. Although she is a mother herself—the narrator has us see a picture of her two blond children on her desk—she reluctantly dedicates herself and her time to helping someone else’s child, or a child that does not look like her own. Both Petra and Estrella immediately feel ashamed of the sweat and dirt on their faces, hands and shoes, and above all, the way they look in comparison to the ascetic white woman, dressed in all white with the picture of two white boys smiling on her desk. They are deeply aware of the symbols of consumerism—a porcelain cat with a nurse’s cap that, like the picture of her sons, adorns her office--and that she owns objects with no utilitarian purpose, in contrast to Estrella’s family that does not even have enough money to eat. The nurse says the family is lucky because, despite it being closing time, she will see Alejo. After his brief check-up with the nurse, she tells Alejo he must go to the hospital in Corazón because she is not a doctor—charging him for the privilege of the fruitless consultation. The family comes up short, unable to pay the discounted ten-dollar charge for her services; they had planned to use their last nine dollars and seven cents on the gas to get Alejo to Corazón.

The family sees the nurse’s care for what it is: abusive and exploitative. At first, Perfecto refuses to pay her with their last money and offers his services as a handyman. As she helps the fragile Alejo move, Estrella feels deeply distressed, knowing that the nurse is taking away the only money they have to save him. The narrator gives us an insight into Estrella’s thoughts: “... And she did not want to think what she was thinking now: God was mean and did not care and she was alone to fend for herself” (139). This thought marks a radical shift in the way that

Estrella and Petra had previously faced adversity by trusting in God. Estrella assumes herself alone and unable to even fathom the idea of God, or a man, or the nurse, or anyone, to intercede.

Perfecto finally and begrudgingly pays the nurse their last nine dollars, arguing with Estrella that Alejo is “not our responsibility” (161). After having been paid, the nurse hurries them out, rushing them as she goes to pick up her children. Back in the truck, unable to take Alejo to the hospital twenty miles away without gas money, Estrella thinks, “If only God could help.” Here she reaffirms that God will never be able intercede, although she wishes He would. As she thinks, she remembers a conversation she had with Alejo about the tar pits, and how he told her how bones make oil and oil makes gasoline. Estrella’s mind goes even further: “The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse’s car from not halting on some highway and pick up her boys at six” (148). Viramontes seizes on this painful metaphor to explain the workings of the United States’ economic system: despite creating inhumane working conditions for the Latino community that no white, Anglo-American would accept, it thrives on their labor. Remembering her conversation about the tar pits, Estrella reaches the conclusion that, “The nurse owed *them* as much as they owed her.” Estrella, transformed, a fierce girl, gets out of the car, takes the crowbar from the trunk and goes back inside the clinic to demand their money back:

—Give us back our money. Her heart dripped sweat. She felt the sweat puddle and dampen the soles of her feet. When the nurse looked up, it was only then that Estrella noticed how perfect her lipstick was.



—What are you talking about? The nurse, who now held her black patent leather purse, clutched it tighter to her breasts.

—Give us our money back.

—Excuse me?

Perfecto moved forward to grab the crowbar, but Petra held him back.

—I'll smash these windows first, then all the glass jars if you don't give us back out money.

—You listen here!

Estrella slammed the crowbar down on the desk, shattering the school pictures of the nurse's children, sending the pencils flying to the floor, and breaking the porcelain cat with a nurse's cap into pieces. (150)

The nurse sobs, her lipstick smeared as she finally opens the tin money box.

Estrella removes exactly the nine dollars and seven cents that Perfecto paid her, showing the nurse what she's taken. The narrator states of this watershed moment in Estrella's character development, "She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother had requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money" (150). At this point in the novel, Estrella's words from the first chapter echo back into action, "No case talking tough unless you do it" (14). Estrella's character now embodies a part of feminism that still, to this day, gets women killed, sent to prison or fired from their jobs; the search for freedom can only be achieved through action.

## **Theorizing after Estrella**

Simone de Beauvoir's contributions on subjectivity are particularly relevant to consider here. Even after third-wave feminism's groundbreaking contributions and increased urgency of intersectional approaches to understanding identity, it is nevertheless important to remember the lessons the founding mothers of the second wave taught us about the struggles against objectification and in favor of being the author of our own subjectivity.<sup>8</sup>

The subject-object dichotomy,<sup>9</sup> first established by Descartes and then re-appropriated by Simone de Beauvoir reminds us that subjects act and objects are acted upon. Although there is always some interconnectedness between both subject and object, for de Beauvoir, if you remove the subject from something, you get only an object. As Estrella subverts the inaction and objectification that characterize her mother, Petra, as in Goldman's words, is "an abject slave to men," and, moreover, to God. Estrella's character reminds the reader that oppression can only be achieved by denying a subject its subjectivity. That is to say, oppression objectifies people. As intersectional feminism has pushed the world to see, the Chicano community in the United States, and Chicana women in particular, have been continually denied their own subjectivity. Viramontes' novel reminds us that there is no freedom from the objectification of our oppressors without action. Although it is in our nature to strive for freedom, although we might believe that feminism has achieved most of its goals, the reality that Viramontes expresses is that when a girl like Estrella

<sup>8</sup> For more on Simone de Beauvoir's ideas on subjectivity, see Marso (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Much debate has circled this dichotomy. For bibliography on this topic, see:

becomes a woman, freedom acquires a particularity that makes it much more complex. Social constructs stemming from patriarchal heteronormativity, capitalism, religion and dogma tend to push us into inaction. Estrella shows us that there is another way.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir reminds us that every project we undertake, every choice we make can either bring us closer to take us farther away from freedom (116). Hence the importance of action and rebellion against the oppressor and the system, even if the oppressor takes the form of a person who shares an oppressed identity, like the female nurse in the passage analyzed in the previous section. Estrella gives us more insight into the subject-object dichotomy and the perpetual need for action: “They make you that way, she sighed with resignation. She tried to understand what happened herself. You talk and talk and talk to them and they ignore you. But you pick up a crowbar and break the pictures of their children, and all of the sudden they listen real fast” (151). Estrella did not even touch the nurse, only raising an object to threaten and break hers. Estrella’s action against the objects that the nurse held dear was enough to make her take seriously the gravity of Estrella’s situation. Estrella was able to reverse the injustice she had faced as she took action on her family’s behalf.

Back in the truck, Alejo—even in his feverish state—takes a different perspective on Estrella’s actions. First, he says, “I’m not worth it, Star. Not me” (152), but Estrella forgives him for his words because of the gravity of his illness. Barely able to stay warm, and even with his eyes drifting, Alejo feels empowered to scold Estrella for what she did for him: “Can’t you see, they want us to act like

that?” Estrella wisely responds in a whisper: “Can’t you see they want to take your heart?” (153). This line’s potency and poignancy is one of the most compelling ways in which Viramontes, through her fiction, contests Anglo-American culture’s belief that hard working Latino people, like Alejo and Estrella, are disposable others.<sup>10</sup> As Simone de Beauvoir explains in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, women are the cultural representations of the “other” because the “self” is constructed by the human-subject, thus meaning that the human-object has no self-identity. Although de Beauvoir was reflecting from her privileged first world, white, European vantage point, her words still ring true despite the years.<sup>11</sup> A person of any gender who has been denied their subjectivity for the purpose of their instrumentality, a denial of autonomy, fungibility, viability or ownership, that is to say, by being treated as any less than fully human becomes an object (139).

A bigger problem emerges then, when the same people who have been objectified, renounce their subjectivity,—as when Alejo says he is “not worth it” (152)—or when people objectify their own people by siding with the oppressor, as when Perfecto argues that Alejo is not their problem. The only solution in order to stop the cycle of otherness is to regain the agency of their own individual and collective subjectivity, as Estrella does in action and words. Viramontes’ novel, thus, is a call to action. She tells us that we must not allow “them” to take out our heart, our humanity and subjectivity, but also to love and care for our people.

<sup>10</sup> It bears noting that Alejo, just like his mother and grandmother, was born and raised in the United States.

<sup>11</sup> *The Ethics of Ambiguity* was originally published in 1947.

## **Our Lady**

Petra's inaction at the nurse's office, is related, as I have argued before, to the foundational myths and belief systems that define women as long-suffering and voiceless. In contrast to Estrella, Petra's ideal of femininity is the Virgin of Guadalupe. However, and interestingly enough, Petra only prays to Jesus, as if only the son, and not the mother, could listen to and answer her prayers. If Jesus (God) is not listening, why does she not pray to the Virgin? Why does she not ask for the Virgin to intercede? I believe her faith is attached to the figure of "the male savior", both placed in God and men. During a flashback of the day she first meets Perfecto Flores, the reader comes to understand Petra's complex relationship with the Virgin of Guadalupe. Petra looks at three posters set side by side above the vegetables and her gaze only fixes on one:

A lopsided poster of the Holy Virgin, Our Lady of Guadalupe was tacked between the posters of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe holding her white billowing dress now. La Virgen was adorned by red and green and white twinkling Christmas lights which surrounded the poster like a sequin necklace. Each time the lights blinked; Petra saw herself reflected in La Virgen's glossy downcast eyes. Unlike Marilyn's white pumps which were buried under the shriveled pods of Chile Negro, La Virgen was raised, it seemed to Petra, above a heavenly mound of bulbous of garlic. (111)

Petra, like many mestizas, Chicanas and Mexicanas, identifies and feels looked upon by Our Lady of Guadalupe. The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe has been reclaimed in many key junctures in the political history of Mexico and the United

States. Her image was *el estandarte*, the banner for Mexican Independence, the Mexican Revolution and the United Farm Workers Movement. The Virgin of Guadalupe both embodies this culture colonized so many times over and physically resembles the brown mestiza woman, in contrast to the figure of the Virgin Mary, which more closely adheres to a Eurocentric idea of femininity and devotion.

Although Our Lady of Guadalupe still stands for certain aspects of Mexican identity, this religious figure has recently been challenged by queer/Latina feminism.<sup>12</sup> Many artists and scholars have made strides in decolonizing the sanctity of Guadalupe. Alma López has visually appropriated La Virgen de Guadalupe iconography in her 2001 controversial digital collage, “Our Lady.” In this visual piece, López depicts a bare-breasted brown-skinned woman alongside elements from the original image of Guadalupe. But instead of using these elements in a typical way, López uses them to subvert Guadalupe’s traditional representation by using motifs such as roses to cover her up as if she was wearing a bikini. Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Chela Sandoval’s respective writing on Alma López’s piece explores how semiotic perception of cultural signs is inextricable from the ideologies that oppress and subordinate people.<sup>13</sup> Gaspar de Alba argues that, with pieces such as Alma López’s “Our Lady,” feminist Chicanas are able to “meta-ideologize”<sup>14</sup> the image by appropriating and transforming these dominant ideological forms, turning them away from their previous oppressive functions (189).

<sup>12</sup> Identify some critical questions that have been made from queer/Latinos/as thinkers.

<sup>13</sup> See Gaspar de Alba and López (2011).

<sup>14</sup> See “Devil in a Rose Bikini” in Gaspar de Alba and López (2001).

Of course, the job of decolonizing Guadalupe and re-appropriating her sacred image is necessary in order to re-signify an icon that has slowly lost its connection to the people, and especially to women. López's "Our Lady" was created over half a decade after the publication of *Under the Feet of Jesus* and, I believe, follows in the steps of this novel—perhaps not directly, but in the sense that its desacralization and re-sacralization of Guadalupe is the byproduct of the subtle art of denouncing dogma. Naturally, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa also both re-appropriated and re-signified the bonds we as Latin-American, Mexican, Latina or Chicana women have with sacred or abstract female entities, such as Our Lady of Guadalupe, Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue, La Malinche and La Llorona. Perhaps Viramontes and other Latinas are going further, taking the next step in the feminist agenda, not re-signifying such icons, but actually questioning the need for them, and therefore, bringing ourselves to question the nature of our affective bonds towards such icons.

For me, today, it is not enough to, like Alma López, reclaim these figures. I believe that instead, as Viramontes attempts to do so, by attempting to abolish such signs and symbols of identity, we may create new ones, untainted by the patriarchal structure in which they were generated—that is to say the writings of white males. In this sense, it's important to pay attention to how Viramontes writes Estrella's character as a blueprint for possible action within the Chicana/Latina cultural field. How, on the one hand, Viramontes has Estrella literally destroying the symbols of consumer culture in order to take back what belongs to her family; and how on the

other hand, she shows how Estrella can renounce the symbols that her family holds dear.

### **God Is a Woman**

Unlike her mother, who idolizes Our Lady of Guadalupe and identifies with her, Estrella completely renounces her holy figure. In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, inside the store at the gas station, the poster of Guadalupe hangs tilted between posters of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe—popular US icons famous for their sex appeal. Even though the gas station is in the U.S., and even though the poster hangs between quintessentially Anglo-American icons, as in any part of Mexico or any Mexican-American community, La Virgen is adorned with lights—here she occupies a privileged position (130). Petra sees herself in Guadalupe’s gaze, as she envisions the image of the poster almost levitating on the clouds, in reality the “mound of bulbous garlic” she needs to rub on her varicose veins (130). Estrella in contrast to Petra, says she finds more beauty and magic in a single red bell pepper stacked up in layers among other green and yellow peppers at the store in a perfect incandescent mosaic, “Not even Elvis’s glitter or the heavenly look of La Virgen held more beauty to Estrella than the red bell pepper” (153). Renouncing the sanctification of beauty, Estrella finds meaning in different mothers—mother earth and her children, her fellow *piscadores*—those who sacrifice their lives for the perfection of that vegetable Estrella finds exposed at the gas station, ready for purchase.

Once Estrella has recuperated the nine dollars and seven cents, the family is able to put the gas in the truck and drive all the way to the hospital in Corazón.



Estrella helps Alejo out of the car and thanks Perfecto for driving them, despite his resentment at being involved in the first place.<sup>15</sup> At the hospital, Estrella leaves Alejo in the waiting room. He begs her to stay and Estrella senses the fear in his words: “*Please, he begged, just stay with me for a while*” (169). Unlike her mother, who believes one should always take care of everyone and everything, Estrella is aware of her own limits and negates the sacrificial ideology inherited from the women that have shaped her existence. Even though she knows Alejo might die, and this moment could be the last time she sees him, Estrella makes a choice and decides *not* to stay because, “He was frightened beyond her capacity to comfort him” (169). Hence, she relinquishes responsibility towards the man she loves and chooses not to comfort him. Estrella knows the engine’s truck is still running and burning the last five dollars of precious gas, and urges him to take control over his treatment, “*Alejo, she said sternly, everything’s gonna turn out all right. Just tell the doctors, she said in a voice filled with a combination of tenderness and irritation*” (169). Estrella makes Alejo take responsibility, mindful that sacrificing herself also means sacrificing the family’s ability to make it home. Estrella is aware that sacrificing herself has larger consequences for others, and for that reason, her love *must* have limits. Thus, Estrella does not cry, nor sacrifices herself to be there for Alejo but keeps her relationship with him within the boundaries of what she believes is enough. The reader faces now a woman who renounces taking on the position of the Virgin Mary, the *Stabat Mater* and incarnating the motherly tender

<sup>15</sup> In this moment, Perfecto realizes that despite his years of working in America, no one has ever thanked him.

love that gives expecting nothing in return. She is not de Beauvoir's "other," she is a subject who acts and is *not* acted upon, even in a life or death situation.

The presence of God in Viramontes' novel begins with the title but is continually visible throughout the storyline. A statue of Jesus dressed in blue robes with removable hands, tiger-eye stones for eyes, and crushing a green serpent with his bare feet is an important recurring motif. A manila envelope under the feet of the statue holds all of Petra's important documents. These documents prove that she and her children are Americans and Catholics, and include Petra's Identification Card, Social Security Card, her children's birth certificates, her marriage certificate to Estrella's father, each of her children's baptismal certificates, Estrella's holy communion certificate, and even an award that Estrella won for a school essay entitled, "My Blue Fat Cat" (166). For Petra, these documents are her most valuable objects. She thinks of the possibilities that these documents offer her children: that with these documents they would be able to return to school, apply for a passport, a job, or even military service (166). The importance of these documents for Petra relies on the fact that her children can achieve social visibility and mobility with them, their citizenship unquestioned and intact. Thus, when Petra stores the documents under the feet of Jesus and kneels in front of his statue—as she does throughout the novel—she symbolically makes a constant appeal to Him to protect their future.

After having returned to the bungalow, having seen her daughter defend herself from the abusive nurse at the clinic, having recovered their money, and finally having seen her leave the man she loves alone at the hospital, Petra no longer trusts

Perfecto. As the narrator tells us, “Perfecto’s back was to her. He leaned on the hood of the car and she wanted to see his eyes. Trust me, she remembered Perfecto saying, but the only trust she had now, was in Jesus” (168). Petra’s last source of faith and protection resides in Jesus, her affective bonds with men now seeming unreliable to her. And for good reason: as Petra stares at him, Perfecto plots to return home with the remaining dollars in his wallet, leaving Petra and the children behind. Nevertheless, Petra makes one last attempt to salvage her relationship with Perfecto, confiding in Jesus to restore her trust and affection for him, and for men more broadly. Petra decides to make an offering to her statue of Jesus and kneels before it. She feels Jesus’ tiger eyes following her and compassionately staring into her eyes. Her unflagging desire to be seen by Perfecto is counterpointed by Jesus’ faithful gaze back at her. Nevertheless, as Petra’s affective bonds with men finally seem unreliable to her, her bond with Jesus also reaches its collapse.

As Petra kneels before the son of God, lighting seven candles for him, she touches the wrinkled crocheted doily placed under the statue and on top of the manila envelope to comfort herself. Petra reflects on the importance of the doily: it was given to her by her grandmother, who silently crocheted this piece and many others as she faced the obstacles in her life. Petra reflects on her father’s death, and how, as he was dying, her grandmother could only soothe herself by crocheting.

What thoughts had gone through her grandmother’s mind as she crocheted, what threads looped and knotted and disguised themselves as prayers? [...]

If only Petra was capable of crocheting, if only she could feel the threads

slip in and out of her fingers like her grandmother once did, she wouldn't feel as if her own prayers turned into soot above her. (166)

Understanding that crocheting was the way her grandmother could bring her thoughts into action, Petra wishes she could also use her hands as her grandmother did so as not to see her prayers, like the candles' smoke, dissolve into thin air in front of her. Petra now doubts the power of her prayers and of Jesus' ability to hear her but is unable to act in a way that could free her from the impotence of her religion.

Petra thus searches for a place to place her fears and her anger. Just as when she was abandoned by Estrella's father, Petra no longer finds solace in her prayers. She is again overwhelmed with feelings of abandonment by men, God's indifference to her, and her own silence. Seeking some sense of security, she opens the manila envelope and reflects on the "Authorization and Certificate of Confidential Marriage" she acquired with Estrella's father only five minutes before the office closed in Orange County, California and remembers how "All the warnings in the world could not stop her" (182) from marrying the man from whom she was already pregnant. Placing the documents back into the folder, Petra tries to stand, but her tired legs give out:

She raised herself but couldn't stand without struggling to brace her legs and so she leaned on the crate to support her weight, and the statue of Jesucristo wavered. Her reflexes were no longer fast enough to catch a falling statue; she could almost see the head splitting away from the body before it even hit the wood planks on the floor. The head of Jesucristo broke from His neck

and when His eyes stared up at her like pools of dark ominous water, she felt a wave of anger swelling against her chest. (167)

At last, Petra *feels* something without disassociating from those feelings. This is a critical moment, given that even after her husband abandoned her, Petra could only bite her thumb and pray. This time we finally see her character feel, and at last, it is anger.

After the statue of Jesus breaks, from the other side of the sheet that divides the bungalow, Estrella, once again, asks, “You okay, Mama?” (167). Petra tells her to go back to sleep and proceeds to pick up the pieces of the now beheaded statue. When she picks up Jesucristo’s head, she is, “surprised by the lightness of the head, like a walnut in the palm of her hand.” Here, she feels the hollowness of her faith, her prayers dissolving into thin air, and Jesus unable to literally and figuratively hold her. She kisses the statue’s feet and holds its broken head. Although her faith appeared shattered, like the statue of Jesus, Petra still holds out hope. Could this be the beginning of her liberation?

Petra is too attached to her faith, her belief system. She searches for Perfecto, who still stands outside against the truck, staring at the road. Petra sees that the circle she made around the bungalow on the ground has been broken and asks herself if she is truly able to protect her children. For a brief moment she questions herself, doubting if her actions serve her purpose: “What made her believe that a circle drawn in the earth could keep the predators away?” (168), she asks herself. Petra gives voice to her fears for the first time: the scorpions are a metaphor for those who want to kick her and her family out of the country. “How long would

it be before they came to arouse the children? Unleash the dogs? The authorities would come as they did for years and pull their hearts out like empty pockets. How long?" (163). Here she echoes what Estrella whispered to Alejo in defense of her actions against the nurse. Petra acknowledges that "the predators" want to take away their hearts and make them leave. Petra's fear of *la migra* transcends the limits of her faith. Although her children are American and she belongs there, working the land, marrying there and following its laws and customs, she fears that the documents inside of the manila envelope will not be enough to safeguard her family against the predators.

Thus, even though for a moment Viramontes allows the reader to think Petra might be able to break free from her inherited dependency on love, "That was all she had: papers and sticks and broken faith and Perfecto, and at this moment all of this seemed as weightless against the massive darkness as the head she held" (169), through that darkness, Petra's faith in men and God is restored. Viramontes writes, "Petra's grasp tightened around the head of Jesucristo. Perfecto stood as quiet as the clouds drifting and she wanted to go see his eyes. If anyone could fix it, Perfecto could" (169). The reader witnesses a major step back for Petra, who was at the brink of realizing that neither God nor any man has been able to do what she and her daughter can: take care of the children and put food on the table. The matrix of love holds her hostage, and the only chance of putting an end to the cycle of female entrapment lies with Estrella. At this moment, Petra considers why she did not intercede to stop Estrella from scaring the nurse with the crowbar. Viramontes' narrator tells the reader Petra realizes she did not stop her daughter because she

knew she was not be able to. Petra has realized that her daughter has already overcome her own fears.

### **A New Love/A New Church**

Now, understanding that Petra had displaced her fear of “the predators” into the scorpions, it is important to return to the novel’s second chapter, in order to understand the family’s relationship to immigration enforcement. In one important moment in this chapter, Estrella decides to walk home, hoping to stop by the playground instead of taking the van home with Alejo and the other workers. However, a baseball game is taking place at the playground and the bright lights from the field scare her into believing *la migra* is searching for her. Although we can take Estrella’s spasm of fear in this instance as a logical individual response to the ongoing persecution of Hispanic farm workers by the United States’ immigration police, Estrella’s response to the situation is a direct reaction to the inherited demand—voiced and rehearsed by her mother—to remain invisible in order to be safe. However, in this passage, Estrella reverts her invisibility. The lights are on her, but they are not out to get her; they just illuminate the stadium, a place for people to entertain and enjoy themselves. Still, Estrella cannot fully participate in the enjoyment of the stadium; the lights trigger her existential fear of *la migra* and cannot join the game. Instead, she runs back home, straight to Perfecto’s toolbox. Both angry and scared, Estrella grabs the crowbar. When her mother asks her what’s the matter, Estrella answers:

—Gonna teach someone a lesson.

—¿Qué dices? What? She opened the tool chest, her breathing hard, and rummaged through Perfecto's tools until she found the thick pry bar.

—Put that away.

—Someone's trying to get me.

—It's La Migra. Everybody's feeling it, mother explained. [...] Do we carry proof like belly buttons?

—Something's out there, Estrella said. [...]

—Don't run scared. You stay there and look them in the eye. Don't let them make you feel you did a crime for picking the vegetables they'll be eating for dinner. If they stop you, if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them. [...]

—Tell them que tienes una madre aquí. You are not an orphan, and she pointed a red finger to the earth, Aquí. (63)

As in the first chapter, Petra talks tough and seems convinced that Estrella will be safe if she tells *la migra* that she was born in the United States, and the documents to prove it are “under the feet of Jesus.” Deep down both know that neither will suffice. This passage makes manifest that even though Petra can see via Estrella's example that there are different ways of seeking safety through action, she chooses to find refuge by hiding inside the bungalow, praying to Jesus and hoping that Perfecto will finally love her, care for her and protect her and her family. Estrella dares to return to the playground where she feared the lights would expose her to *la migra* because she understood that they were *on* her and not *after* her. Still, just in



case, she is confident in the crowbar and her own strength, carrying them with her out of the house.

Estrella establishes a new order, a new way of loving herself and others. At the end of the novel, after Alejo's trip to the hospital and the statue of Jesus has broken, Viramontes has the reader understand that with Estrella's new order also comes a new faith and points to the foundations of a new church. Hearing her mother's statue of Jesus fall and break, Estrella asks her mother if she is okay from the other side of the sheet. Petra's voice orders her to sleep. The narrator recounts how Estrella disobeys her mother, dresses herself, and leave the house, passing her mother, who stares at Perfecto on the porch, and grabs a lantern. Petra scolds Estrella, "Where do you think you are going? She held tight to Estrella's wrist. Estrella didn't know and didn't answer. Then the mother embraced Estrella so firmly, Estrella felt as if the mother was trying to hide her back in her body" (171). Despite Petra's attempt to keep her daughter with her, Estrella takes the lantern and runs into the night.

Estrella ends up in the dilapidated barn, which, as we know from the first chapter, is about to collapse. The barn's foundation is sacred to her, it's where she goes to feel strong and empowered. Although she risks being injured by the unsteady structure, Estrella takes off her shoes and socks, grabs the chain that hangs from the ceiling and pulls herself up to the ceiling, opening the trap door to the roof. Her ascent is difficult and dangerous. She has difficulty seeing, her sweaty palms threaten to have her slip and drop down to the barn floor, and then she accidentally kicks off a bottle, almost shattering the kerosene lantern and burned down the

fragile structure. As she writes Estrella's climb, Viramontes references church bells, the sound of which calls Catholic believers to Mass, "her heart tolled in her chest" (172). As Estrella reaches the roof, these bells ring in her heart. Estrella connects with herself, the moon, the infinity of the black space on the rooftop. She is mesmerized by the stars that "cut the night almost violently sharp." In her state of being one with the universe, the narrator describes the thoughts in Estrella's mind: "No wonder the angels had picked a place like this to exist" (175). Estrella's apparent agnosticism is reversed at this point in the novel—this is the first moment that Estrella is revealed to think or even believe in angels.

In the novel's last paragraphs, with the corroded roof threatening to collapse, Estrella reckons with herself, founding a new church:

The roof tilted downward and she felt gravity pulling but did not lose her footing. The termite-softened shakes crunched beneath her bare feet like the serpent under the feet of Jesus, and a few pieces tumbled down and over the edge of the barn. No longer did she feel her blouse damp with sweat. No longer did she stumble blindly. She had to trust the soles of her feet, her hands, the shovel of her back, and the pounding bells of her heart. Her feet brushed close to the edge of the roof and it was there that she stopped. A breeze fluttered a few loose strands of hair on her face and nothing had ever seemed as pleasing to her as this. Some of the birds began descending, cautiously at first, then in groups, and finally a few swallows flapped to their nests not far from where she stood. Estrella remained as immobile as an angel standing on the verge of faith. Like the chiming bells of the great

cathedrals, she believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed. (176)

Before I analyze the novel's powerful ending, it is important to remember that throughout the text, Estrella's actions and feelings are articulated through the narrator's voice. By the end of the novel, Estrella's voice only rarely appears in dialogue, her actions very literally defining her. Why did Viramontes maintain her protagonist in silence? Estrella's apparent voicelessness would seem to undermine the freedom, leadership and agency that otherwise define her character. Thus, another important question arises: why does the novel end with Estrella's coming-to-god moment if she has already confessed, via the narrator, that she believes God has abandoned her? What do the bells tolling in her heart, the serpent, the angels and her faith mean in this context? Why is this the end of the story?

Estrella's precarious position on the roof and the novel's abrupt ending, with its heavy references to her newly articulated faith, imply an inconclusiveness or ambivalence. It's unclear if the barn will collapse or burst into flames, if Estrella will jump into the abyss of faith, leaving the barn and this life behind her, or slip back down to safety with her powerful heart summoning others to her. The narrator communicates Estrella's feelings of true empowerment and trust in herself, yet ultimately leaves the reader searching, trying to find the meaning behind Estrella's faith. After all the novel tells us, why would anyone still have faith in God and men when they are portrayed as unreliable or absent?

My interpretation is the following. Through Estrella's character, the novel presents a new Messianic era whose beginning corresponds to the protagonist's

wavering between faith and its absence on the roof. The return of the Messiah is reconfigured and absolutely radicalized in the novel when it is constructed through a brown teenage Chicana, a field worker. The new Messiah is able to help others survive, thanks to her own ability to overcome and survive in the absence of the protection of men and God. Estrella, like Jesus, stands on top of the serpent but has challenged Jesus's message of love. Estrella stands against the self-imposed religious biases of Catholicism represented by Petra's character, who sacrifices herself and her health for everyone else, unwilling to help herself yet awaiting God's help in silent prayer. The inactive faith of the sorrowful mother is turned upside down by her daughter, who throughout the text feels inexplicably attracted to the sanctity of the barn, so much so that she refuses to tear it down. In the novel's last two sentences, we know Estrella has connected to the old, archaic, useless, crumbling construction that is about to collapse, giving it a new sacredness. Yet, because the novel stops short of Estrella's step into her new faith, it is the reader who must call this new church into being once the story comes to an end.

### **Homecoming**

The Old Testament posits that in order to sacralize the land and give a sense of belonging to the worshipers of Yahweh, a temple must be built. When King Solomon, son of David, had the First Temple in Judah built, it meant the culmination of the Exodus and the establishment of the United Kingdom of Israel and Judah. In Hebrew the temple was called *Hekhal*, a term whose etymology is borrowed from the Sumerian noun for house. In Jewish eschatology, the construction of The Third Temple would inaugurate a new era and the beginning of

the Messianic age. The Old Testament establishes the reconstruction of the temple as a reconstruction of identity. Viramontes, in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, makes reference to this Old Testament idea in order to mark a new sense of belonging for Estrella's family in the United States through her symbolic foundation of a new church.

As we can see, the relationship between a big home, or temple, is strictly related to the sense of geographical ownership and belonging. The destruction and ability to reconstruct the home serves as a literary device in the novel to establish a new order and symbolize the terms of this belonging. In that sense, when Perfecto is asked to destroy the barn in which Estrella and the kids recognize a sense of belonging—and attempts to comply—he marks his willingness to perpetuate the family's precarity and outsider status. Moreover, Estrella's refusal to help Perfecto destroy the barn and instead reclaim it as her sacred space can be read as her insistence on making the place where her family lives into a true home. She disregards the fact that the landowners see no use in it and refuses to see the barn as a useless structure just because it does not serve its original purpose. By the end of the novel, when Estrella stands on top of the barn, she places her faith in the place as a house that was not hers but can become her and her community's home. Estrella reverts the cycle that United States consumerism has imposed over products and labor, fully recognizing the value of the place and her community.

As Estrella refuses to tear down the barn and instead chooses to reclaim it herself, and despite her mother's dissuasion, she harnesses the power she has accumulated standing up for herself and her family throughout the story, and finds

that she is strong enough to summon “all those who strayed.<sup>16</sup> This moment highlights the character’s developmental arch—Estrella becomes a woman who can take the reins of the old order, making it work for her, *and* establish a new order. We have seen her development through her advocacy along the trip to get treatment for Alejo, her refusal to help Perfecto destroy the barn, her care for her siblings and her mother in the aftermath of her father’s abandonment, and finally, her turn toward a new faith at the end of the novel. By the end of the novel, Estrella has established a different kind of love towards her mother, her siblings, Alejo, Perfecto and God. She does not use love to hide herself and excuse her self-sabotage; she does not delay reckoning with her own needs, like her mother does. Whether the barn collapses or burns down, whether Estrella leaps off or climbs back down, the outcome is of her own making; here she constructs her own faith and establishes her own *Hekhal*.

As I have argued earlier in this chapter, at first glance it might seem contradictory that Viramontes limits Estrella’s voice within the novel. However, we must take into account that Estrella radicalizes love and intimate relationships with her actions and not with her words. She has become a new Jesus, and under her feet,

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the phrase “all those who strayed” can be found in some English translations of the *First Book of Kings* in exactly the completely opposite context. J. Robinson states that the *Book of Kings* includes, in addition to the history of the twice destroyed Sacred Temple of Jerusalem, King Josiah’s story. Josiah participated in the liberation of Hebrew slaves from Egypt, and gave them the land of Palestine and the sacred Temple of Solomon so that they could worship Yahweh according to the law of Moses. The free Hebrews were thus bound to be loyal to Yahweh instead of the various Caananite gods, and were not allowed to display any signs of syncretism. The Deuteronomists, as Robinson explains, use Josiah in the *First Book of Kings* to assert that Yahweh could not be worshipped halfway. Through King Josiah, it is established that God would guide and reward with prosperity those who stayed true to the God of Israel, but would “punish with great severity all those who strayed from the ideal” (13). The northern Kings—such as King Omri and King Nadab—who did not enforce Josiah’s reform have been almost completely erased from history, and are only mentioned as those who did wrong in the eyes of the Lord.

instead of a manila envelope with birth certificates, she has a claim to the land based on her work and experience and a call to action for her community to follow her. In this sense, Estrella, the new Messiah, reconfigures and radicalizes Jesus' message of love as interpreted by the Catholic doctrine—she reverts the self-sacrificial love that Jesus represents. Estrella challenges these dogmatic idiosyncrasies inherited by the Latino community through colonization and its legacy into the present. She asserts her strength and power in order to hail and recall those who are lost, have wandered off, have no place to call home, or who have simply lost their faith in what they were *taught* to believe in. She undermines the matrix of love in which she and her fellow *piscadores* have historically been made to live, opening the circle and pointing to a way out.

## Chapter II: The Insatiable Hunger for Love, God and Freedom

### *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* by Cherríe Moraga

I encountered two difficult tasks while reading, re-reading and analyzing the fascinating play, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* by Cherríe Moraga. One of these tasks was the almost impossible duty of separating the written play from the extensive philosophical and academic writings Moraga has given the world since the seventies. The other task was the responsibility of approaching the dramatic text and putting aside my previous training as an actor. In drama school, I was taught that dramaturgy is not yet theatre nor entirely literature, but *palabra inacabada*, as it is only a finished product when it is *on its feet*, in front of an audience. There is no theatre without a text, but also there is no theatre without an audience. Making sense of the text means reconstructing the play without the manipulation of the director's vision, the lighting, and the acting. In what follows, I hope to translate the experience of being in the theater into a process that enables the readers to *see* the play from their own possibilities as co-creators.

Thus, in this chapter, I present a brief summary of the play and its main components and then analyze and discuss how Moraga reconstructs love as a political category in this text. I argue that the protagonist's apparently erratic behavior is a form of rebellion against the limitations of affective bonds with her lover (Luna), her ex-husband (Jasón) and her son (Chac-Mool). Medea's character continually undermines her relationships with others, landing on the Aztec Goddess Coatlicue as a source of comfort. However, Medea ultimately returns to her pattern of rebellion, apparently reverting the matrix of love, only to find herself displacing



her devotion from Coatlicue to Coyolxauhqui, her murderous daughter. Ultimately, I think that Moraga's Mexican Medea does not go far enough in dismantling the matrix of love, as she only apparently re-signifies the dichotomies between love and oppression, pleasure and guilt, only to return to these binaries through worship. I will close the chapter by making sense of the playwright's choice to construct a character that transcends and decodes three myths—the Greek Medea, La Llorona and the Aztec Hungry Woman—but is unable to extricate herself from the limits of faith. Moraga's decision to close the play with the protagonist worshipping Coyolxauhqui and calling Coatlicue a traitor echoes the European white male colonial vision and interpretation of Aztec mythology. Perhaps, in the late nineties, when Moraga wrote the play, the need for a female goddess was still a spiritual need. However, following feminism's developments over the past twenty years, it is worth considering whether our dependency on dogma, religion and myth may restrain us from further strides toward liberation.

### **The Mother Triad**

Américo Paredes, in his article "Mexican Legendry and the Rise of the Mestizo: A survey" published in the 1971 compilation *American Folk Legend Symposium*, establishes that legends are "ego supporting devices" (97) in the sense that they appeal to individuals by affording them "pride, dignity and self-esteem". Through legendry heroes, Paredes argues, individuals are able to identify with, as well as provide symbols for social aspiration "whether these be embodied in an ideal status quo or in dreams of revolution" (98). In the case of Mexican legendry, Paredes affirms the preference for certain legends, at certain periods in history,

served as a way to construct the modern Mexico “as the mestizo—the distinctive blend of Spaniard and Indian” as well as other ethnic groups that produced “the Mexican national type” (98). Therefore, for Paredes, by studying Mexican legendry (beginning with the arrival of Hernán Cortés to Mexico) allows him to shed light over “the rise of the mestizo as representative of the Mexican Nationality” (99). Although Paredes reminds us that we are familiar to Indian myths and legends only by the pen of Spaniards like Father José de Acosta’s *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* or “Hispanicized Indians” like Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl’s *Relación Histórica de la Nación Tulteca*; to name a few; this is to say, only by the European point of view. According to Paredes, the important difference between these two accounts of the same story is that Father Acosta relates the events he writes to Greek and Roman Mythology, whereas de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl “attempts to reconcile the resentment of the conquest and the loss of his mother’s civilization with acceptance of the Christian religion brought by men like his father” (100). Nonetheless, Paredes argues both recounts are important as they are the first attempts to come to terms with the Indian-Spanish synthesis “that would dominate Mexican national life” (100).

In the colonial period of Mexico (La Nueva España at the time), the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyac in 1531, marked a creation of a new miracle legend that still supports, to this day, the Mexican identity. For Paredes, this particular legend served an important function from the point of view of the conquistadores in their efforts to Christianize the Indians. Hence, the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe, served as a way to “redirect some of their frustration as

conquered people” (101). As a matter of fact, Paredes argues the Virgin of Guadalupe was the only symbol to which mestizos, creoles or Indians could relate serving as a “common consciousness” and becoming “the mother of the Mexicans” through the achievement of independence, enabling the construction of the national identity. Although it is, to this date, still subject of debate whether the story of Guadalupe is a legend or myth, Paredes affirms she influenced the behavior of generations of Mexicans regardless of their ethnic background reminding the reader, those who followed Hidalgo into battle cried “Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe and death to the Spaniards!” (101). Likewise, the symbol of La Virgen de Guadalupe served the Chicano Movement of the 1970’s attributing to the Virgin a number of miracles and serving as aid as well as reference to their Mexican roots. For Paredes, the relationship between Mexican-Americans and the attributed miracles to the Virgin of Guadalupe “are attempts to maintain a status quo in the face of cultural change” (102).

After the colonial period, another legend came to light, which is that of “the Weeping Woman” (La Llorona). For Paredes, although this story could be based on medieval legends, “it also owes something to a love-them-and-leave-them theme common in Old World literature from classical to modern times, from Euripides’ Medea to Puccini’s Madame Butterfly” (103). However, Paredes argues, the reason the legend of La Llorona is still so prevalent is because it touches on deep roots in the Mexican tradition: “because it was grafted on an Indian legend cycle about the supernatural woman who seduces men when they are alone on the roads or working in the fields” (104). She decides if she will destroy her lover or help him make

fortune: “She is the legend of *matlacihua* or Woman of the Nets among Náhuatl speakers” (104) but has also appeared with other names among the Mixes, Popolucas, and later on as *la segua* in the north of Texas as well as in Panamá.

There is something fascinating to humans about a woman who hunts the night, but Paredes proposes it has more to do with a fascination from the mestizo, as a byproduct of his inability, at certain moments in history, to suppress a certain thrill of horror at the idea of miscegenation and thus “sees all kind of morbid behavior as a consequence” (106).

Hence, for Paredes, La Llorona appears in many shapes: “now Malinche, now Medea, now *matlacihua*, now Madame Butterfly, she still hunts the night” (106). In the end, the fact that the mestizo was (and somehow still is) the disinherited and classless individual, or as Paredes refers to him: “restless and dissatisfied in a stratified, static social structure” (107) then it makes sense it was the mestizo who needed the Virgin of Guadalupe the most to anchor his identity in a world that offered him no place he could call his own.

Paredes states the earliest legend one could consider Mexican is the story of “Doña Marina” sold into slavery from her family to Hernán Cortés, but his account is wrong according to Bernal Díaz del Castillo in his *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*. Díaz del Castillo states that although Malinalli (her nahuatl given name) was the daughter of upper class nahuas (her parents were landowners), upon the death of her father she was sold by her mother to a group of Mexicas who traded women. Later on, she ended as property of the Indians from what is now the state of Tabasco, who gave Malinalli plus nineteen other girls as a

peace offering to the Spaniards (including Hernán Cortés). Malinalli was then striving to survive as a Spanish slave and was renamed Marina by Alonso Hernández (to whom she belonged) according to Margo Glantz's readings of Bernal Díaz del Castillo in her book *La Malinche, sus padres y sus hijos*. As soon as the Spaniards realized she could translate from mayan to náhuatl and vice versa, she took the role along with Jerónimo de Aguilar of translating for Cortés to Spanish, but soon de Aguilar became useless to Cortés, as Marina was able to learn Spanish rather quickly. Marina acquired again a respected status amongst her people, thus they called her Malin (from Malinalli) adding the suffix "tzin" which in náhuatl means "noble", which the nahuas also used as a suffix for Cortés. Likewise, Díaz del Castillo calls her "Doña Marina" and gives her fifty percent of the credit for the conquest of Tenochtitlan.

According to the 2019 documentary "Malintzin: La Historia de un enigma" which compiles in two hours the most recent research and debate on the subject from the point of view of today's specialists from all around the world; the film reminds the viewer Malintzin was three times a prisoner, first sold by her mother, then given without her consent to Alonso Hernández (one of Hernán Cortés's captains) and later passed on to Cortés. Although there are some records by Díaz and other *cronistas*, according to the documentary, which state Malintzin was pregnant twice, one child is often referred as Cortés' son: Martin Cortés, who left with his father to go back to Spain without Malintzin; as Margo Glantz constantly reminds the reader, *los cronistas* were paid by the Spanish Crown to create compelling stories, hence as truly historical material they are unreliable. Therefore,

the idea that Malintzin killed Martín (her son) to avoid Cortés from taking him to Spain without her, has no historical basis although is a normal part of how legends are constructed through the oral tradition. In *Los Códices de Tlaxcala* (codex and paintings found inside the caves of Tlaxcala) Malintzin is the only woman ever depicted with the symbol of “the word, or the voice” coming out of her mouth (according to Glantz). Sometimes the symbol depicted bigger than the one accompanying the image of Cortés (75). Nevertheless, Glantz reminds us, the noble prisoner was not allowed to ride a horse and in all of Cortés’ travels Malintzin is said to be forced to walk while the men rode on their horses making a public demonstration of her inferior status.

After the Conquest, Malintzin was stripped away from the suffix “tzin” and given the suffix “che” as a derogatory reference, because a widespread conviction of the first female translator being a traitor to her people, although as Margo Glantz questions: who were her people? The nahuas? The tlaxcaltecas? The mayas? The mexicas? Actually none, because she was deprived since an early age from a sense of identity linked to any group or civilization. During Mexico’s nineteenth century, a whole reconstruction of Malintzin took place as “la traidora a la patria” giving place to the adjective “malinchista” (the one who favors the foreigner and rejects the national) but Glantz affirms this is an incorrect use of her name, as she was not a traitor to any country, because there was no such thing as “a country” during the time she was alive. During the first half of the twentieth century, Mexican men like Octavio Paz, José Emilio Pacheco and Carlos Fuentes; ponder upon La Malinche in their writings, but then again; her story was told by men.

It is not until the second half of the twentieth century, Mexicanas and Chicanas problematize the legendary relationship between La Llorona, La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe, like Rosario Castellanos, Sandra Cisneros, Amanda Nolacea, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Deena J. Gonzalez, Sandra Messinger Cypess, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Antonia I. Castañeda, María Herrera Sobek, Guisela Latorre, Emma Pérez, Tere Romo; among others<sup>17</sup>.

What is important about their work is the fact that they reconstruct the legendry triad in order to give voice to the female characters that have been used as foundational symbols of “the mestizo” that, as Paredes claims, produced “the Mexican national type”. Hence, the retelling and reconstruction of these female characters (La Malinche, La Llorona, Guadalupe) by modern women with Mexican roots who are also citizens of the United States, question the utopic “motherland” of Aztlán<sup>18</sup>, making evident the boundaries of the heteronormative patriarchal structure

<sup>17</sup> See the 2004 compilation of essays published by Arte Público Press: *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche* edited by Ronaldo Romero and Amanda Nolacea.

<sup>18</sup> It is not the purpose of this dissertation to dive into the very complex topic of “Aztlán” as it would entail a whole different thesis, however, the origin of Aztlán can be found in various náhuatl stories that claimed Aztlán as the “lugar y patria de origen de los aztecas/mexicas” (the motherland of the mexicas). According to the *cronista* Diego Durán in *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España*, the Emperor Moctezuma Ilhuicamina (Moctezuma I) during the early fifteen century, sent his ambassadors to Aztlán, which was situated in the northern part of Mexico (today California, Arizona and New Mexico). After their return, the ambassadors said to have encountered the mother goddess Coatlicue. The religious and cultural exchange between this region and Tenochtitlán became paramount for the development of the Mexica civilization, and the sacred road to and from Aztlán symbolized the link between grandparents and young mexicas residing in the valley of central Mexico. Later on, Álvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca around 1528 after taking over “La Florida” attempted to find the sacred route to Aztlán followed by other Spanish commissaries like Fray Marcos, Francisco de Ulloa, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo and Juan de Oñate. The sacred land of origin for the Mexicas was soon conquered by the Spaniards along with Texas, Nevada and Utah; only to be taken again by the United States in 1848. Today the original “citizens” of Aztlán are still hailed as “wetbacks” or “immigrants” and the route back to Aztlán is restricted to Mexicanas/os. Since Alberto Baltazar Urista (Alurista) wrote *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*; Aztlán became the symbol of the motherland for mestizos and later on the Chicano Movement used the concept of Aztlán to claim the proper right to the land. In literature, today, Aztlán represents a fictional future where “Mechicanos” conquer back their land, and the US border that has divided Mexicanos as “an open wound” according to Gloria Anzaldúa. For more on their concept of Aztlán, refer to *Borderlands/La*

that surrounds the dream of a modern Aztlán, making evident that behind the dream of taking back Aztlán, and the stories that enabled this imaginary, lays a subjacent system of values that either hail women as crazy, dangerous witches, whores, traitors, or simply silent, inactive and “pure”. The fact that these symbols and stories continue to be of service to the Mexican and Chicano/a identity begs for a reconfiguration that enables the visibility of women outside of the above-mentioned categories and the legendary triad. This side of the of the story is now re-written by Chicanas like Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Alma López, Sandra Cisneros; among others.

The importance of such re- appropriations, I argue, is the fact that in this effort, the new approximations and constructions of La Malinche, La Llorona and La Virgen de Guadalupe, allow, simultaneously, a reconfiguration of the love bonds that have sustained the original legends/myths. This effort to (re)write the origins of love within the foundational symbols for both feminist Mexicanas and Chicanas, becomes an even more significant endeavor, as they consequently also claim ownership for their role in the 1970’s Chicano Movement and the future efforts to gain equality and visibility in a land that once belonged to our ancestors and in which we are now treated as second class citizens. If we take into consideration the fact that the foundations of *motherhood* and *motherland* for the Mexican and Chicano identity, have been linked for centuries to the legendary triad (as stated by Paredes) then, women have been removed as active participants in the fight for

*Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) *En Otra voz* by Nicolás Kanellos (2002) *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland* by Rudolfo Anaya (1989) and *The Decolonial Imaginary* by Emma Perez (1999).



rights and equality; and relegated into archetypical categories that derive from such mythical characters. As Nicolás Kanellos in his analysis of Alurista's poetry "Must be the Season of the Witch" states: writers or poets like Alurista who place La Malinche within the same ground as Medea and La Llorona (the weeping mother) are blaming Malintzin for the destruction of Indian civilizations; "blamed for cultural infanticide" (262). Therefore, for Mexicanas and Chicanas, to remain inactive towards these representations, perpetuates our role as traitors or cultural filicidals. Hence the importance of Moraga's work that allows for future generations to have different approaches to Mexican legendry and the role of women in modern culture.

In the following sections I will analyze how Cherríe Moraga develops into a play the mother triad, and how she is able to reconfigure the "love-them-and-leave-them" theme common in Old World literature that Paredes refers to. I also question if in fact, Moraga manages, through her play, to deliver a new legend, a new symbol or a new story for the Chicana lesbian experience that can serve as a form of revindication against the male dominated discourse of women as treacherous, revengeful sorcerers, through her character of the Mexican Medea.

### **The Hungry Woman**

*The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* was written in 1995 and had its first stage reading the same year at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre. The play has been performed more than a dozen times since then, including a staged reading at the *Plays at the Border Festival* at San Francisco's Magic Theater in December 2000, directed by the playwright herself and a season-long production at Stanford

University's Pigott Theater in May 2005 directed by Adelina Anthony. Like many of the other productions of the play, both of these performances were received with mixed reviews. A majority of the reviews for the 2000 and 2005 productions determined that the text was cryptic and academic. Various reviewers emphasized the fact that in Anthony and Moraga's production, the theoretical power of the text was too dense to be translated onto the stage. As Paul Birchall from Backstage Review wrote, "Sadly, though, Moraga's writing doesn't explore any of the issues in anything beyond the most academic and dry manner, creating a show that feels thematically half-baked and ponderous. It's often such a seemingly endless slog, one finds oneself wishing that the increasingly unhinged mother would just off the kid already so we can go home" (Birchall). Moraga's play has been continuously criticized as overwritten, with heavy, stilted, borderline-impenetrable dialogue and a plot so pretentious and metaphorical it never connects with the viewer on an emotional level. Although I have not had the opportunity to see the play in person, I would have been eager to watch Anthony's vision and direction and can understand the challenges that staging this text might present.

*The Hungry Woman* is a two-act play written in a delirious form, with various oneiric scenes that are difficult to interpret. According to stage directions, all roles—except for that of Chac-Mool—are to be played by female actors (Moraga Characters). The characters tend to use the same vocabulary, tone and tempo in their dialogues, and most of these do not move the dramatic action forward. At times, the text is not able to sustain the dramatic tension and instead allows it to plummet and slow scenes, making them feel stagnant. At some critical junctures, it is difficult to

tell if the scenes advance the plot of the play at all. However, as Brecht reminded his disciples: theatre is a breathing and living organism that is meant to intellectually challenge a non-passive spectator. Hence, the play must never give the audience what they ask for, but precisely the opposite, which is what Moraga does with her play *The Hungry Woman*. As I learned in drama school, creators should never fall into the trap of generalized praise; to receive only positive reviews is as dangerous as receiving only negative reviews. Although Moraga's play is difficult to read in a formal sense, it is nevertheless important to consider how the spectator, or reviewer, may displace their dislike or distress at the discussion of socio-political issues onto their perception in the play as a whole. Moraga has displayed enormous bravery and eloquence in transforming her theoretical work into a theater piece. Acknowledging the critical reception of her work only provides further context to understand the cultural field in which it has been situated.

To analyze the text of this play, therefore, is crucial to understanding the contributions of Moraga's work to the theatrical and literary fields. For one, Moraga's play has an important prescient dimension regarding the development of US-Mexico politics, locating her play in the recent past: "The early part of the second decade of the twenty first century. A future I imagined based on a history at the turn of the century that never happened (Moraga 6)." The poignancy of the central elements of Moraga's play are in many ways too familiar in our current political landscape, which also makes her play prescient, ominous and frightening to analyze in light of the United States' government's challenges to the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) policy; separation of children from their

families during immigration proceedings; the increasing number of hate crimes by white supremacists; the attacks on the equal marriage act coming from Christian fundamentalism; and the push for the construction of an impenetrable physical barrier along the length of the Mexico-U.S. border.<sup>19</sup>

However, Moraga's critique is not limited to the U.S. context. The importance of this expansive understanding of cross-border history that Moraga presents here resides in the Chicano community's sense of being *ni de aquí ni de allá*, or spatially dislocated from either context, yet needing to stay informed about both the U.S. and Mexico. Moraga's vision in which the utopian Aztlán is undermined from within seems like a reference to and critique of the Chicano Movement of the 1970s. Although the Chicano Movement achieved great material gains for farm workers, such as higher wages and further labor protections, and brought the Chicano community's existence and issues that they faced into the national spotlight, the movement left minimal space to work through how gender- and sexuality-based violence impacted the community. In this setting, Moraga subtly reminds us that despite fighting for the rights of ostensibly all Chicano/as people, activists during the Chicano Movement often relegated these issues to the backburner, or treated them as the domain of other identity-based movements. For this reason, Moraga's Aztlán in *The Hungry Woman* is a male-dominated oppressive system that has managed to place women back in the kitchen and the LGBTTQA+ community dead or in the wastelands. Thus, to read Cherríe Moraga,

<sup>19</sup>Or, perhaps more precisely, along the border between current and former Mexican territory, and across thirty-six sovereign indigenous territories including Tohono O'odham, Pai, Kickapoo, Cocopah, Kumeyaay, Apache and Yaqui lands, recognized as such by the United States (The Conversation and Office of the Federal Register).

the playwright, is to read Cherríe Moraga the activist and academic. Likewise, to understand the importance of Moraga's play is to understand her approach to these issues with the history of the Chicano community in mind. Moraga enriches our understanding of the variety of undertones of the Chicana experience that lie in her poetics, her fears and beliefs.

Although Moraga's poetic and essayistic writings such as *Loving in the War Years* (1983) and *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* (2011) are part of the foundational literary structure that supports the intersectional variant of the feminist movement, I believe it is paramount to pay the same attention to her playwrighting. Moraga's play allows us to construct a more vivid universe of the author's continuous search for identity and belonging as a white Xicanadyke, as she calls herself, and through the various "dislocated" loci the author inhabits in every aspect of her life. In all of Moraga's writings, I see a continuous search to connect to the complexities of her identity. She searches for these connections, coming to understand herself as a U.S.-born Mexican of mixed parentage, a lesbian growing up in a country that subordinates women, Latinos and homosexuals, and as a person living in a region deeply embedded in the indigenous present, but where some insist that indigeneity and indigenous people be regarded as part of the past. As Moraga explains in the preface to her play, she found comfort in the questions she kept asking herself: "Who are my gods?" and "Who are my people?" When she discovered the stories of the mutilated women of our Indigenous American history, such as Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue and La Llorona, she chose to recuperate them from their most denigrating portrayals: "I worship them in my attempt to portray them in

all their *locura*, because I admire the living expressions of their hungers. They, like my dreams, insist on truth and as such become my allies in a war against forgetfulness” (*Xicana Codex* x). Moraga seeks to remember where we come from as mestizas, to tell the stories of women who have transcended the limits of femininity. Recalling the founding mothers of our indigenous heritage allows her to write and re-imagine freedom within femininity, pointing out that although these figures are the “codices” of a history, a tradition and a motherland that have been colonized, they may also be decolonized (Moraga 2011). After all colonization has wrought, we Mexicanas or Chicanas alike, still have the blood of indigenous women running through our veins; Moraga fights not to forget this fact in her struggle to give Chicanas and Lesbians a more dignified place in the world.

### **Medea and Her Mythological Doubles**

Some reviews of the *The Hungry Woman* describe the plot as a retelling of the Greek tragedy of Medea by Euripides. Although there are some similarities between Moraga’s play and the Euripides’ version for the myth, I only see a surface correlation. The story of Medea has been told not only by Euripides in *Medea*, but also by Hesiod in *Theogony* and Apollonius in *Argonautica*. In these versions of the myth, Medea falls in love with Jason and helps him, using sorcery, to complete all the tasks necessary to retrieve the golden fleece from Aeëtes and become king. However, Medea helps Jason only under the condition that he will marry her upon successfully completing his quest. Medea goes to great lengths to facilitate Jason’s rise to the throne, and in some versions of the myth, in a state of drunken love, even kills her own brother to help Jason. Despite Medea’s efforts, according to Euripides,

after ten years of marriage and various children, Jason abandons Medea for the King of Corinth's daughter Glauce.<sup>20</sup> In an act of rage and revenge, Medea kills Glauce with a poisoned dress and slits the throats of two of the children she had with Jason, leaving him without heirs (Griffiths). Moraga's Medea, on the other hand, explores more than just the intersections between love, revenge and motherhood. Instead, Moraga intertwines other aspects of identity such as the Chicana Lesbian experience, and displaces entirely Medea's role as sorceress, making her an activist instead. Moreover, Moraga introduces Medea in relation to Aztec and Pre-Columbian mythological traditions as described by Américo Paredes<sup>21</sup> while reformulating some elements of the classic Greek theatre such as the chorus.

The text of the *The Hungry Woman* opens with an author's note in which Moraga notes that the play takes place after a civil war, and that the United States has been divided in the war's aftermath. Over the course of the play, the action shifts from Medea's present—where she is an inmate in a prison psychiatric ward, accused of murdering her son Chac-Mool—to events that took place in the past, in what is left of Phoenix, Arizona. By means of the stage descriptions, lighting and atmosphere, we understand Phoenix to be a futuristic dystopia in the style of "Blade Runner" (Foster 91).<sup>22</sup> Now a lost and ruined bordertown located between

<sup>20</sup> Accounts differ regarding the number of children they had—in Euripides' version of the myth, Medea and Jason have two sons.

<sup>21</sup> Refer to previous section of this chapter "The Mother Triad"

<sup>22</sup> David William Foster compares *The Hungry Woman*'s dystopian setting to *Blade Runner* in "Phoenix as Dystopia in Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman*," using Moraga's references to 1982 film to question why she chooses to locate so much of the play in Phoenix instead of in Los Angeles or California, where she usually sets her written work. Foster argues that Moraga chooses Phoenix because of the metonymic reference to the phoenix rising up out of the ashes, writing, "The whole idea of the Phoenix rebirth is, of course, preposterous hokum: there are no ashes from which to arise again, but rather the sempiternal burning floor of the desert, and except for the remote and mysterious Hohokam Indians who disappeared almost four hundred years before any modern dweller

Gringolandia and Aztlán, the Chicano/Indigenous nation-state also referred to as Mechicano country throughout the play, Phoenix becomes “a gypsy ghetto” (Moraga I.3) where the abject subjects of Aztlán society are thrown away like trash. Medea had been an active participant in the revolution that led Aztlán to gain its independence. She also facilitated her husband Jasón’s rise through Aztlán’s political structure, helping him gain his position as Minister of Culture. However, Medea’s utopian Aztlán is short lived, as a counter-revolution reestablishes a male-only patriarchal political structure, forces women back into domestic roles, and pushes queers and dissidents into exile in Phoenix, Arizona. After finding Medea in bed with her butch lesbian lover, Luna, Jasón banishes Medea, their son Chac-Mool and Medea’s grandmother, Mama Sal, into exile in Phoenix; here, the reverberations of Jasón’s retaliation ripple out far beyond Medea, engulfing her whole family. When Medea is forced into exile, Jasón promises to take back their son Chac-Mool as soon as he turns thirteen. The play begins at seven years after Medea’s expulsion, and her pact with Jasón to return their son Aztlán is about to be fulfilled, detonating the plot.

The play itself begins with contemporary interpretations of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican music at the altar to Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess of creation and destruction. A stone image of Coatlicue, flanked by a chorus of four women—who, as we are told in the text, died in childbirth—are presented to the audience. As soon as the altar is lit at the beginning of the first act, the play takes us inside the

arrived, there was no one before upon the ashes of whose destroyed city for the Anglo city to be built” (93). Foster uses this opportunity to introduce the complexities of settler colonialism in the Phoenix-area desert suggested by Moraga’s text.



psychiatric ward, where we see Medea wearing a hospital robe, her hair disheveled and her skin pale with very dark circles under her eyes. When Medea speaks, her words do not always relate to the reality she is living; she is obviously in a state of mental distress.

The scene quickly shifts to Medea's memories, and the action jumps to the Phoenix of the past. Inside Luna's room, Medea is drunk and surrounded by bottles. She is trying to pick a fight with Luna, but her words have no relation to Luna's responses. After shifting back to the present, with the prison guard hailing Medea as "the hungry woman," Luna recounts the Aztec creation myth about a woman with many mouths who could never be satisfied, explaining how the Hungry Woman's mouths always called for more, even when the spirits descended to create the forests and the mountains and valleys to feed her. Moraga further explains this myth in the forward to the play: "Sometimes, says the legend, you can still hear her crying for food" (52). What tools does Medea have to feel satisfied and to stop the pain of hunger? What is the meaning of this hunger? Moraga continues to explain that women like La Llorona, Medea, and the Hungry Woman are insatiable because they are hungry for justice. Condemned to live between worlds, history has condemned these three as crazy, broken, dismembered and unsatisfied women who hunger to be whole again. Through the retelling of the Hungry Woman myth, Moraga brings the reader-spectator back into the past to Medea's erratic behavior and a lover's quarrel with Luna. Medea jealously interrogates Luna about a long hair she found in their bed. However, Medea quickly reveals the origin of her discontent, as she finally declares that she wants Luna to stop being so obedient and compliant, and almost at

peace with their banishment from Aztlán. Still unable to get Luna to lose control and fight against the system that has put them in Phoenix, she insults Luna:

MEDEA: Take the whine out of your voice [...] You are weak, you don't love me. You just follow the rules. You're afraid of me. Do you think that makes me feel safe? [...](Grabbing LUNA) Don't you give up on me.

¿M'oyes? Fight for me, cabrona. You're worse than a man. (I.6)

The text has previously described Luna as a butch lesbian. Medea's jab in the last line of the quote is a direct reference to her sexuality and how she performs her gender. Before shifting back to the present time of the play, we see how Luna gets ready for her visitations with Medea, wearing a suit and carrying flowers as if putting on a mask, as if they were a costume that allows her to relate with Medea. Medea often insists on interpreting Luna's gender as indeterminate, even despite Luna's declarations to the contrary:

MEDEA: I used to have spectacular thighs. Remember Lunita?

LUNA: You still do.

MEDEA: Remember how I'd wrap my thighs around your boy's face.

(Holding her face) How come I called it a boy's face when you are so female?

LUNA: (Pulling away) Just macha, Medea.

MEDEA: Why would you look at me that way?

LUNA: What way amor?

MEDEA: Like you didn't have what I had, like you didn't have nalgas, senos más firmes que yo, a pussy...that perfect triangle of black hair.

LUNA: I'm just a jota, baby. (I.8)

Luna identifies herself as a macha and jota, terms that are synonymous with gay masculinity. However, Medea realizes that Luna's performance and embodiment of masculinity in their relationship is not stronger or more relentless than her own gender in her fight against the status quo. We see more of the character's realization of her own "performance of womanliness" later in the play when, in order to stop Jasón from taking Chac-Mool back to Aztlán, Medea uses the power of female seduction as a weapon against her former husband. Medea gets in character by wearing a very short, tight silk black dress that accentuates her body, and fixes herself as to enhance her features. Medea also prays to Coatlicue to help her exercise power over Jasón:

MEDEA: Madre Coatlicue.

I want to know your sweet fury.

Teach me your seductive magic,

your beauty and rage.

Make Jasón small and weak.

Make him shiver.

Within the folds of my serpent skin.

He feared me before.

Help me make him remember why. (I.10)

Her serpent skin does not only resonate with the myth of Coatlicue but also with the idea of gender as an outside cover to belong to and satisfy the patriarchal notions of binary identity. After seeing Medea's "preparation for attack," Luna disapproves of

Medea's charade by telling her, "You do not flirt with power. You fight it" (I.9). Luna, like Medea, has a narrow vision of what fighting back against power looks like, and for Luna, embodying an idealized femininity is contradictory to Medea's objectives.

Regardless, Medea meets Jasón at a motel and acts flirtatious and harmless, playing into her femininity. Jasón interprets Medea following her self-presentation, saying, "You're not a lesbian, Medea, for chrissake. This is a masquerade... you're not a Luna"(I.9). Medea leans further into how Jasón characterizes her as she brings her son's return to Aztlán into the conversation, "After the war...before Chac-Mool, I felt completely naked in the world. No child to clothe me in his thoughtless need, to clothe the invading lack of purpose in my life. I can't go back to that." Following a brief exchange, the stage directions tell us that Medea and Jasón embrace and make love.

Here, Moraga introduces another facet of Medea's character pulled from Mexican mythology—by sleeping with Jasón, Medea incarnates the figure of La Malinche. La Malinche<sup>23</sup> is a mythologized historical figure who has been villainized for her role in facilitating the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlán. Although La Malinche was a skilled interpreter for the Spanish, she is most often maligned for sleeping with Hernán Cortés and bearing his son. As a woman, La Malinche's very material support to the Spanish Conquest as an interpreter is often reduced to a sexual matter, rather than analyzed in all of its complexity. Moraga's

<sup>23</sup> For more information on La Malinche's multiple interpretations refer to *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche*, (2004) as well as Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *(Un) Framing the "Bad Woman"* (2014), Cherríe Moraga's *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* (2011) and *This Bridge Called My Back* (2015)

references to La Malinche invite us to consider the motivations of both Medea and La Malinche<sup>24</sup>. Medea's return to Jasón at the beginning of the first act in order to keep her son, although ultimately unsuccessful, shows her determination to fight for what she believes she deserves. Jasón says that Medea may only remain with her son if she leaves Luna and moves to Aztlán to the house where he and his new wife are happily married.

After Jasón deceives Medea, she takes her anger out on Luna, who then leaves her. From there, through Mama Sal's voice we are introduced, for the first time, to Medea's second counter character reference—La Llorona. The stage directions describe Medea coming back home after her failed attempt to convince Jasón not to take her son away. Medea shuts herself inside the house while Mama Sal, Luna and Chac-Mool listen to her cries of desperation:

MAMA SAL: Give's you chicken skin, doesn't it?

CHAC-MOOL: Sounds like a baby crying.

MAMA SAL: They moan like that when they're lonely for their machos.

[...] She got such a lonesome llanto. Es el llanto de La Llorona. (I.7)

Unlike the reference to La Malinche, Mama Sal's description of the Pre-Columbian legend contrasts with Medea's performance. The standardized reenactment of La Llorona's cry now has a different origin. Medea, as la Llorona, is not only left by "her macho" for another woman—the reality of Medea's situation is more

<sup>24</sup> In *The Decolonial Imaginary* Emma Perez states that if La Malinche is significant in a post-Oedipal historical moment, Malinche is the third point on the triangle along with Cortés and Moctezuma but at the same time, is her own person outside the triangle (as a mother, actress, diplomat lover, mistress) making her a symbol difficult to place because she manages to (in a way) escape the Oedipal triangle.

complicated. Medea has already left Jasón, but now pushes the tender and understanding Luna away, because she cannot support her rebellious spirit. Moraga sketches Medea's autonomy as a Lesbian Llorona as a series of choices, not the outcome of betrayal. Now that Medea is about to lose her son, she is forced to acknowledge that nothing has changed; even appearing to comply with the demands of the powerful does not get her anywhere. At this point in the play, Medea faces the possibility that her son will take after his father, regardless of all her efforts to prevent this outcome:

MEDEA: Get out!

JASÓN: Not without my son.

MEDEA: ¿Qué crees? That you'll be free of me? I'll decide, not you. You'll never be free of me!

JASÓN: Free! You're the slave, Medea, not me. You will always be my woman because of our son. Whether you rot in this wasteland of this counter-revolutionary degenerates or take up residence in my second bed [...] You can't stop me.

MEDEA: Watch me.

JASÓN: If you really loved your son you'd remove him from your tit.

MEDEA: So his mouth can suck your dick?

JASÓN: That's how your dyke friends talk, Medea? Look at you. You hate men. And boys become men. What good are you for Chac now? He needs a father. (II.4)

Medea has raised her son to be the change, naming him after the Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican sculptural figure representing warriors returning to the sky, bearing gifts for the gods upon their death. She hopes her son will be the messenger, the link between two worlds—the patriarchal society and the utopia one that she and her fellow Mexicanas have built—that will initiate a new era of change in Aztlán. Yet the powers that exiled them in the first place are the same that Chac-Mool willingly submits to when he decides to stay in Aztlán. Medea fears the strength and knowledge she has taught him will be used against her and others like her. She does not want to let go of him for fear that he will become a servant of his mother's oppression. The stage directions then describe the chorus, which becomes a group of warrior women. As they encircle Medea, they dance and, "They pierce and slash themselves, wailing. They encircle Medea with the ghostly white veil of La Llorona" (II.2). This performance foreshadows Medea's future embodiment as both the Greek Medea and La Llorona, as well as her journey later in the play to find the strength to transgress her role as a mother and kill her son for the sake of a better future for her people.

### **Love is Faith**

As the reader-spectator can acknowledge, Moraga's Medea's abject displacements are caused and cured by love. Her love for Luna is the reason the protagonist is exiled by her own people from Aztlán, and it's also how she finds, at least temporarily, some solace from her exile to Phoenix. Medea is also controlled by love, and attempts to wield it, although unsuccessfully against others. This is the case when Jasón threatens to take Chac-Mool, the person she loves the most, away

from her. Medea attempts to use love against Jasón as a weapon to try to revert the pact they had made seven years earlier. Ultimately, her attempts to seduce Jasón are unsuccessful. Instead of falling in love with her again, he uses her for sex and then reaffirms his intention to take Chac-Mool back with him to Aztlán. As both figures of partnership and love in the past and future—Luna and Jasón—are insufficient and, in different ways, are willing to perpetuate the oppressive system they live under, Medea attempts to take control and to fight back in the name of love. However, in doing so, she takes away the life of her son, the person she loved above all else. By sacrificing her son for her motherland, Medea changes the course of history. The protagonist is a prisoner of love, and the only way she can free herself is through the annihilation of sexual love and the reversal of the standard for the inactive and sorrowful motherly love: the *Stabat Mater*.

However, to consider love in *The Hungry Mother* only in terms of sexual and motherly love would be to ignore the divine love that Medea continually activates through her faith. Faith comes to the fore in Moraga's play through the author's references to foundational Mexican myths and legends, such as La Llorona, Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui. This faith is different from the Christian faith described in other moments in this thesis. Instead of being a faith in a divine presence that has the power to change the protagonist's lot, Moraga offers a new mythology that subverts the dogmatic self-sacrificial construction of the woman through figures like the Virgin Mary and Coatlicue, as well as La Llorona and the



Greek Medea.<sup>25</sup> Medea prays at Coatlicue's altar, but does not use the ideology of her myth to subject herself to self-sacrifice; instead, Medea, in Coatlicue's absence, takes matters into her own hands. Our Medea re-writes the foundational stories by being betrayed in a more profound way. Her husband did not just abandon her to be with a younger woman but took away her sense of identity and belonging, leaving her with no land and no home to claim as her own. Just like the Greek Medea, the Mexican Medea has been exiled, but even more so, she has been exiled from the Mechicano Nation of Aztlán, which in the play's setting, accounts for the utopia: an independent country ruled and governed by mexicanos/chicanos in a territory that includes the Southwest of the United States, as well as what used to be northern Mexico before it became part of the United States. Hence, Medea as a lesbian mestiza inhabits a limbo: a pariah for the Mechicano Country of Aztlán which by blood she identifies with, but unable to fit in any of the other countries described by Moraga in her dystopian setting like "The Union of Indian Nations", "Africa-America" nor what is left of the United States "White-America". Medea inhabits a place which she is not able to call "land" but rather "a wasteland" where identity and belonging are erased.

Moraga's new mythology displays how the patriarchy entraps women, pushing them to extremes. Medea will not accept her life in banishment, because acceptance for her would imply compliance with the system that robbed her of her identity and subjectivity; neither will she return to Jasón's "second bed" (II.4) in

<sup>25</sup> Coatlicue is betrayed by her own daughter and conceives the God that would rule the universe, Huitzilopochtli.

Aztlán as his concubine, because in doing so she would be siding with her oppressor. The importance of Medea's actions lies in that she will not sacrifice her beliefs just to belong or feel comfortable; she will not remain in silent compliance to save herself and her son from the wasteland. Moraga here highlights how silence and inaction are ways to side with what we fear, leaving no room for reality to change. Moraga's alternative to silent compliance and self-sacrifice resides in the examples that Coatlicue, La Llorona and Coyolxauhqui provide for Medea. Thus, love and faith are reconfigured in this play as a different kind of sacrifice. Moraga transforms the Judeo-Christian self-sacrificing woman into the kind of sacrifice that puts a woman's responsibility towards the future of her land<sup>26</sup> and the well-being of future generations of women before her own comfort and well-being. Moraga makes evident the fact that *el silencio otorga*.

### **Medea and the Abject**

Julia Kristeva understands the concept of the abject as, "that which draws the subject into the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 72). Medea, her son Chac-Mool, her lover Luna and her grandmother Mama Sal find themselves excluded from the frames that they would have define them, in terms of their relationship to a homeland, in terms of their gender, race and sexuality. The

<sup>26</sup> I use the concept of "land" throughout this work as the literal and symbolic space where identity meets belonging, distinguishable by its relationship to "the home" where duty, burden and obligation are shared by members of the same area, that relate to the same values and social diversification of power. However, an interesting approach to the intricate link between the concepts of community-home-nation is analyzed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her 2003 book *Feminism Without Borders* in chapter five "Genealogies of Community, Home and Nation" in which Mohanty states that in a globalized world and the rise of multicultural feminism, it becomes nearly impossible to construct a definition of nation and home, but rather, she affirms, such concepts are strictly related to individual experience, even though the way each individual understands and defines such concepts, is profoundly political, and should be the product of the genealogy one creates for oneself through whatever is emotionally and politically enabling.

meaning of these categories collapse as Medea, her lover and son are banished from the land they once belonged to as mestizos (Aztlán), erased from the place where being mestizo/a was a symbol of union and freedom from the Anglo Americans that had claimed ownership of such territory. However, only Medea's character refuses to passively accept an abject existence. She forges her own identity from the ashes. On the other hand, Luna, Mama Sal and Chac-Mool accept their fate and try to make the best of the home and destiny they are pushed to take on. In Medea's case, meaning collapses as she loses her motherland, and is on the cusp of losing her child to power-hungry Jasón and the people that betrayed her and turned her into an outcast.

Medea's abjection functions in four ways. First, she is banished from her own country by her own people. Second, her bisexuality becomes one of the primary causes for her banishment to Phoenix; she breaks with the normative heterosexual household, reconfiguring it with "a macha" (I.8), as Luna refers to herself. Even more so, Medea relinquishes her motherland's expectation that she, as a feminine woman, take responsibility for the private and domestic life and nothing else. This aspect of the character is a clear reference to Mexican machismo that expects mothers and wives to be the "ángel del hogar."<sup>27</sup> Not only does she neglect such responsibilities, but she creates a life-disrupting chaos that disturbs the home

<sup>27</sup>During the nineteenth century, western European societies developed a new model of domestic woman that permeated literature and other arts. In the novels of such writers as Benito Pérez Galdós, the concept of the "ángel del hogar" became a normative standard within the Hispanic tradition. The concept was defined in these texts as a woman who was responsible for creating a safe haven for men at home. The mentality of the time determined that women were expected to be "moral guardians of the sanctuary of the home" (Fuentes Peris 28). The wife and the mother was described in literature as a submissive, sorrowful, chaste, patient; completely devoted to the domestic sphere and expected to create a perfect and safe place for the husband.

that Jasón seeks to establish for himself. Thus, she, in fact, adopts and resignifies the behavior of the Mexican macho. Medea challenges all decorum with her drunkenness and loudness, her jealousy, and her controlling and suspicious behavior, turning her identification femininity and motherhood on its head. In the process, however, she drives her lover, Luna, away. Moreover, her inability to settle into exile as her lover Luna does, in addition to her remaining love and attraction for Jasón, leads her to question her sexuality. Medea's struggles with her sexuality throughout the play seem to be defined by her attraction to both the female and male embodiments of masculinity; she is not gay but not straight either. Her bisexuality challenges the etymological binary at the root of her sexuality. Third, by committing the infanticide—an extreme act for a mother—Medea finds herself even further ostracized; no longer accepted within the community of outcasts in Phoenix, she is confined to a psychiatric prison. She ends up at the very fringes of society by completely disrupting her affective bonds. By taking away the human life she brought into this world, she takes the concept of the *Stabat Mater* to the limit, refusing to stand sorrowfully while her son is taken away, but also taking ownership and responsibility for the consequences of the life she created for herself. Finally, Medea's abjection is also defined by the way she challenges how Chicanas are expected to pray. Instead of praying to the Judeo-Christian God or the Virgin of Guadalupe inherited through the legacy of Spanish colonization in Mexico, she prays to Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess of creation and destruction. Medea also prays in a very particular way: instead of asking for Coatlicue to intercede and help her magically keep her son with her, she prays for Coatlicue to give her the power of

seduction so she can change Jasón's mind and return to Aztlán with her son as a full part of society. Medea is willing to return to heterosexual family life, leaving Luna behind, but only under certain conditions. However, Jasón denies her this opportunity. Faced with her abjection in this situation, Medea resolves to resignify the aspects of her identity that have been undermined in exile. When Jasón is not able to produce another heir with his much younger but barren wife, he demands Medea give over the custody of her Chac-Mool and become his second-wife. Instead of returning to Aztlán with Chac-Mool, and returning to a subordinate position as mother and wife, Medea makes a radical and violent decision. She denies Jasón their marriage bond and a male heir and resolves to kill her own child. Medea places her faith in the future of the new Aztlán she founds by sacrificing Chac-Mool. Through the conditions of her abjection, Medea forges a new way forward, a new meaning of womanhood in Aztlán.

Many of *The Hungry Woman's* critics argue that Medea saves her son by sacrificing him. I do not agree with this reading. In Tania González' "The (Gothic) Gift of Death," she claims that the play is "a portrait of a woman who kills her child to save him from a hellish existence" (Gonzalez, 45). On the contrary, Medea's character kills her own son in an act of self-preservation. She kills Chac-Mool in order to stop the being that she created from becoming like his father. She refuses to let her own blood sustain a system that rejects and subjugates women and queer people. She comes to realize at the beginning of the second act that her attempts to influence her son over the past seven years were futile: Chac-Mool's decision to

return to Aztlán with his father traces a future in which he ends up perpetrating the system that banished them in the first place (II. 4).

I also reject González' argument that Medea gives Chac-Mool the "gift of death" (Gonzalez, 50). Medea's filicide is not a gift or an act of love towards her son, but rather a gift and an act of love for her nation and for humanity at large—in order to stop history from repeating itself. By not allowing her own son to become the tyrant leader of the Aztlán that banished her in favor of the counter-revolution, she acts in her own self-interest. However, her self-interest is not limited to her individuality; rather, it extends to those who share the parts of her identity that have been oppressed and objectified by counter-revolutionary Aztlán society. I believe Moraga has created this character who is able to sacrifice her own child for the greater good of the nation, to acknowledge that socio-political responsibility means making extreme sacrifices. At first glance the reader might think these are the actions of a mad woman—in fact, she is even characterized as "crazy" by her son (II.8). A more profound interpretation of the play suggests that Medea radicalizes the potential of women's affective bonds, following in Emma Goldman's steps, and extends them outside of the limits of domesticity and motherhood. Indeed, I agree with the argument that the character's filicide should not be read as plain madness or pathology. Moraga creates this dramatic construction by rewriting the stories that hold our identity and underpin our moral landscape as well as the belief systems we inherit. Medea not only radically contests the accepted and normalized way a woman should love and be loved, but also the total liberation from such bonds. As I argued in the introduction to this work, the texts I analyze here show

women choosing between indifference and undertaking uncomfortable or unthinkable feats. As Moraga states in her codex using the story of Malitzin, or La Malinche, the cycle must stop. Unlike Malintzin, Medea refuses to let her son occupy the seat of colonial power.

### **Almost There, but Not There Yet**

In *The Hungry Woman*, Moraga is unable to fully overturn the oppressive structures that are behind our subjectivities within the space of the play. Nor is she able to dismantle the hidden forms of normativity in the myths she has Medea revere. Although Moraga clearly intends to construct the psyche of a woman whose search for a way out of her oppression leads her to madness, ultimately Moraga leads her character into an essentialist hole in which she pathologizes Medea's most radical qualities. First, Moraga has Medea revere the goddess Coatlicue, fascinated by her femininity and her power to give life and take it away. However, as soon as the protagonist wields the goddess' power, she begins to regard Coatlicue as a traitor for not stopping her son from killing his sister, and she turns against her. Medea has known the myth all along; she knows that Coatlicue did not ask to be magically impregnated. Moreover, she knows that Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue's daughter, convinces her four hundred siblings to kill their own mother only because she feels betrayed that Coatlicue has become pregnant at such an old age. When Coatlicue is about to give birth, Coyolxauhqui and the rest of her children ambush her, but her newborn son, Huitzilopochtli, defends her with the same sort of violence Coyolxauhqui had previously attempted to wield against her mother. In the play, Medea scorns the mother goddess by saying she could have stopped

Huitzilopochtli from killing Coyolxauhqui. She blames Coatlicue for the actions of her son.

If Coatlicue had stopped her son from killing his sister, as Medea wishes in the play, Coatlicue would have died. However, Medea does not hold Huitzilopochtli responsible nor scorns him; instead, it appears as if she dismisses the treason of the daughter that attempted to kill the mother, wishing Coatlicue would have killed her son, perhaps in an attempt to justify her own filicide. Yet Medea does not sacrifice herself by going back to Aztlán with her son, complying with the system that banished her. Instead, she mourns Chac-Mool, and in the play's last scene, imprisoned in the psychiatric ward, she allows his ghost to lead her to her death (Epilogue). Still, throughout the play, she blames Coatlicue for betraying women by allowing the death of her daughter and giving birth to the god of the sun. Medea seems to think that Coatlicue was not brave nor rebellious enough; perhaps Medea thinks Coatlicue failed to kill her own son before he was able to do harm, as she was able to. By the end of the play, Medea reveres Coyolxauhqui and diminishes Coatlicue for immaculately conceiving the sun and letting him live, at the expense of his sister and in her own self-preservation. Medea diminishes Coatlicue for choosing a different path than she did. Perhaps Medea no longer identifies with Coatlicue because she favored her son over her daughter, or perhaps she identifies with Coyolxauhqui because she, too, was banished to the darkness in order to give other light.

Carmen Aguilera, a specialist in Aztec mythology, explains in her *Flora y fauna mexicana: Mitología y tradiciones*, that Coyolxauhqui's myth was used to



justify the existence of an apparent binomial configuration of the world beginning with day and night, light and darkness. In this myth, Coyolxauqui and her siblings become the moon and the stars in the darkness of the night set in binary opposition to Huitzilopochtli, the sun. The explanation for such duality is often referred to in Aztec mythology as perpetual war between female and male forces. Moraga's character falls into an essentialist approach to the myth and clings tenaciously to her belief in a myth which, the same as the "legendary mother triad", was created by a few privileged Aztecs close to power, and re-written by the white Cristian *cronistas*; without truly questioning gender binaries at the root of indigenous mythology.

Although the play's protagonist is far braver and more rebellious than any of the goddesses she worships, the shift in her faith that leads her to choose Coyolxauhqui and call Coatlicue a traitor undermines the radicality of her actions. Mourning the death of her own son, and lamenting Coyolxauhqui's death over Huitzilopochtli's survival does not condone her own filicide. Her situation is by no means comparable to Coyolxauhqui's attempted matricide. To claim that Coatlicue could have stopped her son from defending her implies that there is enlightenment to be found in the banishment of all into the darkness. Coatlicue's myth is more complex than Moraga seems to intend in *The Hungry Woman*. I understand that Moraga sees Coyolxauhqui as mythological victim of patriarchy; she, like many women, is banished, broken and thrown into the darkness, stripped of her subjectivity. However, Medea does not need to identify with the mythical figures she reveres, nor to be guided by them. Coatlicue apparently fails her, as she does not listen to her prayers. However, Medea transgresses so many boundaries without her

grace that Coatlicue's silence begs the question of why Moraga binds her to this belief system when it is also shot through with these patriarchal norms?

There is a symbolic doubling at work here. As we see in the reenactment of Coatlicue's myth at the beginning of Act II; just after Medea's failed attempt to manipulate Jasón at the end of the first act, Medea is made to take on the role of Coatlicue. Not only does her character worship her, but Moraga suggests that there is an equivalence between them. As the chorus narrates the myth to the audience, the characters revert to their mythological counterparts. Medea/Coatlicue performs the actions that the chorus describes, stuffing feathers into her apron, representing that she has become pregnant. The chorus then explains that Coatlicue's daughter, Coyolxauhqui—played by Luna's character—feels betrayed by her mother's unexplainable pregnancy. The doubling at work here is made manifest in the character's names: Coyolxauhqui is the moon goddess and Luna is the Spanish word for the moon. Huitzilopochtli is also doubled, as Chac-Mool plays the son of Coatlicue/Medea and the sun god during the interlude. So, when the prologue's dialogue begins with Luna/Coyolxauhqui decrying her mother's betrayal, stating "You betrayed me, Madre," Medea's relationship to both characters is further complicated. In the main narrative of the play, Medea has just betrayed Luna by returning, however briefly and noncommittally to Jasón, and has yet to forsake worshipping Coatlicue. We can interpret this doubling in the meta-narrative as Moraga foreshadowing Medea's remorse for having turned away from Luna and toward Jasón. Later, when Huitzilopochtli dismembers Coyolxauhqui—"I exile you foreign and female into the vast hole of darkness that is your home" (II,

Prologue)—and throws her head into the sky, Coatlicue/Medea cries out, “La Luna!” Medea’s relationship with Luna is undermined throughout the play by her biological and affective tethers to her son, and this moment exposes how Medea not only sacrifices her son, but allows her relationship with Luna to be sacrificed for her own survival. The chorus closes the scene stating, “This is how all nights begin and end.”

The reenactment of Coatlicue’s myth is also justified within the context of the play as a means of tracing Medea’s backstory and preparing the audience for her eventual shift in consciousness. Back at the psychiatric ward, she remembers how her own mother always favored her brother, betraying her by never putting an end to his sexual abuse towards her as a child. Medea recalls her mother always saying her brother was “the only man in the family” (II.2), and therefore she should give him anything he wants. Medea realizes she was betrayed by her own mother favoring her brother. Likewise, this sequence shows how Chac-Mool’s ascent to the sky depends on his distance from his mother. Medea also thinks back on how over the years Chac-Mool slowly grew so distant from her that he became eager to move to Aztlán with his father, seeing no harm in leaving her behind.

The text makes evident the point of no return in the play comes far before she is forced into the psychiatric prison. The turning point in her narrative comes the day she realizes there is nothing more she can do to prevent Chac-Mool from allying himself with her husband by returning to Aztlán and taking on his Spanish name, Adolfo. The audience witnesses her internal calm in the minutes before she poisons Chac-Mool the night before his departure to Aztlán; Medea has already

come to terms with her decision. Still, despite her loving and kind demeanor toward her son, she is unable to hug him back when he says goodbye. After he drinks the poisoned *atole* she has prepared for him, the stage directions describe Medea in a “pietá image,” holding Chac-Mool’s limp body in her arms as she sings a Mexican lullaby (II.9).

After her filicide, Medea calls out to Coatlicue, blaming herself for being like her own mother by favoring the son over the daughter. She blames the goddess for doing the same with Huitzilopochtli. Medea cries out to Coatlicue and decides to stop revering her, banishing the goddess from her faith. She declares that she will adopt Coyolxauhqui as her goddess:

*[Calling out against the wind and to the illuminated figure of Coatlicue]*

MEDEA: What crime do I commit now, Mamá?

To choose the daughter over the son?

You betrayed us, Madre Coatlicue

you anciana who birthed the God of War.

Huitzilopochtli.

His Aztec name sours upon my lips,

as the name of the son

of the woman that gave me birth.

My mother did not stop my brother’s hand

from reaching into my virgin bed.

Nor did you hold back the sword

that severed your daughter’s head.

Coyolxauhqui, diosa de la luna.

[*Her arms stretch out to the full moon*]

Ahora she is my god.

La Luna, la hija rebelde.

Te rechazo, Madre.

MEDEA: ¡AY-Y-Y-Y-Y! ¡MI HI-I-I-I-JO! (II.9)

In her book, *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance*, Alicia Arrizón discusses her conversations with Moraga on the co-presence of the Pre-Hispanic Coatlicue and Greek Medea myths in *The Hungry Woman*. According to Arrizón, Coatlicue represents the "pre-patriarchal" mother, and thus the resistance of the mad Coyolxauhqui becomes an assertion against "patriarchal motherhood" for Moraga. Thus, lesbian desire is equivalent to Coyolxauhqui's disobedience in the play and functions as an attack on the larger frame of patriarchy. Medea is not a woman who regrets transgressions of the social order; she is not the Medea found in the classic, though patriarchal versions of the Greek myth. Instead, this Medea embodies the complexities of motherhood while transgressing her role as a potential lover of men (I.8). Pre-patriarchal or post-patriarchal, either way, I argue that Moraga's Medea transgresses too many aspects of the patriarchal order for the Aztec myth to correlate to her character's own sense of disobedience.

It seems to me that the shackles of religion—that is to say, the affection that Medea has for the goddess—keep her tied to a male narrative. As we know, Aztec myths, sculptures and codices have not been transmitted to the present in a pure form. Centuries of colonial rule by the Spanish and the advent of the Mexican

nation-state have manipulated these cultural forms, such that our interpretations can never be fully free from these perspectives. Moraga accounts for these influences by constructing the “pietà image” of Medea holding Chac-Mool at the end of the play. Unable to detach her character from the Judeo-Christian and Classical Greek influences, she exposes the violently enforced dogma of the Spanish colonizers for what it is. Moraga makes an apparent reference to the icon of the sorrowful mother by visually echoing Michelangelo’s sculptural portrayal of the son and the mother after the crucifixion.<sup>28</sup> The playwright attempts a shift in the traditional Christian perspective by introducing Chac-Mool’s ghost to the psychiatric ward to visit Medea. After Luna brings Medea poisonous herbs in order to give her the choice of death, Chac-Mool’s ghost urges her to drink them and take her life. In the last moments of the play, the ghost of her son holds Medea in a “reverse pietà image” (Epilogue).

The choice of this final image as the ending to the play still baffles me. The need to reverse the previous “pietà image” as Medea’s hallucination can perhaps be interpreted as a form of self-forgiveness on her part. The reader-spectator knows Chac-Mool is dead; hence her incarceration in a psychiatric ward. Chac-Mool’s ghost comforts her, letting her know he is fine and that he is taking her “back home.” When Medea asks where home is, Chac-Mool’s ghost points to the moon and assures her that he is taking her there. The final scene closes with Chac-Mool’s

<sup>28</sup> Michelangelo’s interpretation of the icon is famous because Mary is rendered as a young and beautiful woman, looking younger than her adult son. In the sculpture, her son’s expression shows that he is at peace, regardless of his wounds. Michelangelo’s *Pietà* is located inside St. Peter’s basilica at the Vatican.

ghost holding his dying mother in his arms, and as the lights gradually fade, the stage directions read, “only the shimmering moon remains.”

The appearance of Chac-Mool’s ghost during Medea’s death allows her to escape the fate of La Llorona and the Hungry Woman, both mythological figures destined to wander in pain throughout the land of the living, crying out for their children and for justice. Moraga redeems the protagonist’s actions by imagining the moon as another kind of utopia, where Medea may be united with her lover. Before she dies, Chac-Mool says, “Come here Mom, ¿ves la Luna?” Medea connects “la luna” in the sky with her lover, responding, “La Luna. That was her name.” In this way, Moraga queers the Moon, reconstructing the light in darkness as a queer Chicana, a butch dissident that allows the Chicana lesbian identity to not only be seen, but also worshiped.

### **Mama Sal and the Transmission of Aztec Myths**

The playwright’s emphasis on the original Greek Medea myth makes me wonder how it helps free her protagonist. It is important to remember that Mama Sal acts as a repository of traditional Mexican beliefs, in many instances throughout the play, and memorably calls upon them when Medea cries after failing to convince Jasón not to take her son away: “They moan like that when they’re lonely for their machos” (37). She also calls upon them when she advises Luna, “When you’re a girl, hija, and a Mexican, you learn purty quick that you got only one shot at being a woman and that’s being a mother” (52).

## **The Mortal Moon**

Mexican mythical tradition resonates even to this day with the strict link between womanhood and motherhood. Although Medea breaks this paradigm, after her death the reader-spectator is not able to judge if the protagonist feels incomplete by choosing to undo her role as a mother. Neither does Moraga present Luna's fears or identity clearly. We know that Luna accepts their exile and tries to make the best of it by keeping their indigenous traditions alive and loving Chac-Mool as her own son. But is Luna's love for Chac-Mool different from Medea's? Does Luna love Chac-Mool less than she loves the responsibility for the women and children in a fascist Aztlán? Due to the fact that Medea's solution is to kill her son while Luna remains on the fringes, seems like Moraga places the character of Luna as an inactive and politically indifferent character, but paradoxically by the end of the play, Medea swears devotion to Luna's mythical counterpart (Coyolxauhqui) which I still struggle to understand.

I wonder if in fact Medea feels the guilt and remorse that she speaks about with the ghost of her son in the final scene. Has her action subverted the unbreakable link between motherhood and womanhood described in Aztec mythology? Or does she feel incomplete after renouncing her identity as a mother? Is this any different for Luna? The play does not pose such questions, but rather presents a woman that breaks with the expectations and sacredness of motherly love of her own free will and not out of revenge. Could the playwright achieve the same effect through fewer scenes? Possibly. Could her play pose her intellectual concerns in a deeper way? Perhaps. Nevertheless, constructing a self-sacrificing and



unhinged woman, hungry for justice and a bond of true love is not an easy task which does offer a profound look into the complexities of the Chicana identity, but unfortunately, I argue, does not manage to overthrow the male dominated construction of Nation and identity, due to the fact that she still writes within the boundaries of the original myths and legends. On the other hand, I do believe Moraga offers a warning upon a premonition, in the sense that, if the time comes for a new Chicano revolution to take place; this time women will not be excluded from the creation of the New Aztlán, that is to say, erased from history as they were back in the seventies. Men must beware of women, just as the Aztecs feared Coatlicue, because just as Coatlicue, women have the power of creation and destruction.

*The Hungry Woman* and Moraga's fascinating interpretation of the Medea's and Coatlicue's myths deserve further analysis as the world and the feminist agenda evolves.

### **Chapter III: Desire, Pleasure and Faith in Lesbian Chicana Poetry: The Painful Journey against our Mothers' Teachings**

The day I told my parents I was in love with a woman, the world stopped. But only for my mother. A miscalculation on my part made me believe that my cultured, well-rounded and privileged parents would just ask me to introduce her to them. I was wrong. I lost my relationship with my mother that day, only to have her return to my life when “the other woman” was no longer around. My partner at the time, a very successful, independent 37-year-old woman, was not allowed to talk to her parents about me either. This led me to undertake two years of anecdotal research during which I interviewed 80 Mexican women between the ages of 30 and 40 who identified as openly lesbian or bisexual cis-gender. These women came from all different walks of life, and yet from the eighty women I interviewed, only an astounding 15% had a good relationship with their mothers and were allowed to talk about their partners or bring them over to family events. At the same time, I managed to interview 80 Mexican men within the ages of 30 and 40, who identified as openly gay, cis-gender. Again, although they came from all walks of life, to my utter surprise 70% of them reported having an “exceptionally good relationship with their mothers and a “good to okay relationship with their fathers,” and were able to comfortably share their family life with their partners. At the time I started my interviews, the equal marriage law had just passed in Mexico City and five other states in the country. This law, and the culture of acceptance that spurred its passage, may have had a positive impact on the social dynamics of homosexuality in the family. I also found that whereas 83% of the men I interviewed had come out

to their families during their teenage years or early twenties, 90% of the women I interviewed did so during their late twenties or early thirties. This research led me to believe, perhaps, men had had more visibility within the fight for gay rights and equality, because Mexican families were apparently ready to tolerate or accept their gay sons, while their lesbian or bisexual daughters were still a specimen difficult to place. Why? Fifty percent of the lesbian or bisexual women I interviewed reported a good or indifferent reaction from their fathers, but a negative one from their mothers. Again, I wondered why, but more importantly *how* this data translated to the experience of lesbian Chicanas in the United States, as they already deal with the fact of being treated as second-class citizens because of their heritage and gender. To my dissatisfaction, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis did not shed light on these matters.<sup>29</sup> I could write multiple chapters on the feminist intersectional theory that informs such a conundrum; however, I believe the most potent use of language resides in poetry.

<sup>29</sup>In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud rejects all conventional theories on homosexuality such as deviance or degeneracy stating all human beings are born bisexual, however he is unable to offer his own psychoanalytic theory on homosexuality writing: “we are not in a position to base a satisfactory explanation on the origin of inversion upon the material before us” (146). When he finally encounters the possibility to study female homosexuality with an eighteen year old woman forced into therapy by her parents, as recorded in his essay “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman” (1920), the father of psychoanalysis seems to fall into the trap of his own previous theories, struggling to account for the Oedipus Complex and although suspecting Oedipal asymmetry, suggests perhaps his patient felt displaced or rejected by her mother when her brothers were born, only to contradict himself later by stating not all women in the same situation will “fall victim of homosexuality” referring to “other factors outside trauma such as an internal nature.” Freud specifically writes that in this case, “the mother’s attitude towards the girl was not so easy to grasp.” The analyst explains the mother did not seem to take the daughter’s infatuation with another woman “so tragically as the father” but rather “her opposition to it seemed to have been aroused mainly by the harmful publicity with which the girl displayed her feelings” adding that the mother was “decidedly harsh towards the daughter and over-indulgent towards her sons.” I interpret the mother’s disapproval of her daughter’s homosexuality as damaging to the family’s image and status in society. Finally, Freud stops his sessions with the young woman explaining to her parents she should be seen by a female analyst and finishes by writing: “It is not for psychoanalysis to solve the problem of homosexuality.”

Chicana writers Karen T. Delgadillo, Cathy Arellano, Natasha López and Carla Trujillo dig deep into the nuances of Chicana lesbian identities. However, despite their important work, to this day, these writers have been met with aversion in both private and public spheres. Hence, in this chapter, I study three poems from Carla Trujillo's marvelous anthology, *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About*, in an attempt to grasp, through the poetic language of lesbian Chicanas, the difficulties they face as openly gay women, as well as a raw sense of their experience as part of a *machista* literary tradition. These women are in the paradoxical position of inhabiting the so-called land of the free and, despite this, do not actually have the same social standing or opportunities as other women, namely their white, straight and wealthy counterparts. Analyzing their poetry will allow me to understand how they feel, experience and think about love in the context of a tradition in which a woman who loves another woman can become an abhorrent disruption to the family values reinforced by their own mothers.

Thus, in this chapter I argue that in order to radicalize love, these three poems give voice to the aspects of love that are expected to remain unsaid and are uncomfortable to say and hear. Here I seek to understand how poetry can turn love into a political category. I place poetry before theory in order to analyze the various ways that Chicanas dismantle the ways women are expected to love and be loved. I'm also interested in how lesbian Chicanas radicalize their affective bonds, including those with the gods their mothers taught them to revere. Analyzing these poems in this way will allow me to figure out how lesbian Chicanas disrupt their

affective bonds with the Catholic God and what aspects of their experience they perceive as obstacles to their quest for equality and freedom.

The first part of this chapter focuses on the poem “I believe en la mujer” by Cathy Arellano. In this section, I explore the relationship between love, desire and dogma, as well as the concept of queering the moon and “the menstrual taboo.” In the second part of this chapter, I focus on “deseo” by Karen T. Delgadillo and analyze how she uses menstruation to radically deconstruct the political body and the limits of acceptable desire. In the third part I read “From between our” by Natashia López to explore the “menstrual taboo” in reference to sorority: a potent and transcendent form of love. In these three sections, I argue against Alain Badiou’s claims that love is not political to consider how all forms of love can have a political dimension, given its relationship to categories like pleasure, desire, nudity and faith, to name a few.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About**

Carla Trujillo’s anthology *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* was originally published in 1991 by Third Woman Press. Carla Trujillo is a lesbian Chicana writer. Most of her published work followed in the wake of her initial anthology. Her novels *What Night Brings* (2003) and *Faith and Fat Chances* (2015) were both published over a decade after *Chicana Lesbians*. Her second edited volume, *Living Chicana Theory*, however, was published a few years after her first anthology in 1997. Trujillo has won a PEN/Bellweather Prize for socially engaged fiction, a Lambda Literary Award and an Out/Write Vanguard

<sup>30</sup> See Badiou (2012).

Award, among others, for her work, and has lectured on her writing and the Chicana experience at numerous universities in the United States (Espinoza).

As Alicia Gaspar de Alba writes in her classic early literary history of lesbian Chicana literature, the late 1980s and early 1990s period was a particularly active moment for lesbian Chicanas and saw the publication of groundbreaking texts by Cherríe Moraga, Carla Trujillo, Yvonne Yarbo-Bejarano, Adelina Anthony, Aída Hurtado, Ana Castillo, Karen T. Delgadillo Tatiana de la Tierra and Gloria Anzaldúa; among others.<sup>31</sup> This period saw the publication of a number of anthologies of writing by Latinas, and by Chicanas in particular. Gaspar de Alba notes that Trujillo was inspired to compile her anthology by reading Juanita Ramos' 1987 anthology of Latina Lesbians, *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians*. Third Woman, Trujillo's publisher, also released a special issue, "The Sexuality of Latinas," co-edited by Third Woman founder Norma Alarcón, Ana Castillo and Cherríe Moraga in 1989. The previous year also saw the publication of Gloria Anzaldúa's important anthology, *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* by Aunt Lute Books. With her anthology, Trujillo critically expanded on the aforementioned anthologies, special issues, and books by creating a space for lesbian Chicana writers to speak about their experiences and create from and beyond them. Creating this space was important because, as Carla Trujillo explains in the introduction to her anthology:

Our own existence imposes a reclamation of what we're told is bad, wrong, or taboo, namely, our own sexuality. Add to this the sexuality of other

<sup>31</sup> See *Living Chicana Theory* edited by Carla Trujillo (1998).

women, our lovers, and we become participants in a series of actions which are not only considered taboo but, by these very acts, give validation to the sexuality of another woman as well. (x)

Trujillo's affirmation is as poignant for Mexicans because of the violence young women, and lesbians in particular in Mexico are exposed to because of their sexuality. Men, on the contrary, are expected to display a comfortable relationship with their sexuality from a younger age. In Mexico and in communities of people of Mexican descent in the U.S., there is a popular saying often repeated by mothers in reference to their supposedly handsome sons: "*Viejas, guarden a sus gallinas, que mi gallo anda suelto.*" As the chickens, young women are expected to be detached from their sexuality in order to be perceived as pure and worthy of marriage and respect. Nevertheless, they are expected to desire men in order to reach their true place in society as mothers. Hence, when the rooster in the aphorism is met with neither fear nor desire but absolute indifference, the matrix of love and desire as the foundation of patriarchal society as we know it shatters. However, men are not the only perpetrators of this ideology. Trujillo emphasizes the role of mothers, writing that, "although our fathers had much to do with imposing sexual conformity, it was usually our mothers who actually whispered the warnings, raised the eyebrows, or covertly transmitted to us the 'taboo nature' of the same sex-relationships" (Alarcón x). The reason for this "taboo nature" resides in the fact that it contradicts what our mothers taught us, that we had to be well behaved in order to *earn* a good husband and had to follow our Catholic values, unless we wished to be subjected to unimaginable violence. In the Catholic tradition the only positive representation of

feminine power is the Virgin, and therefore the qualities of an ideal woman and mother derive from her example. Nonetheless, regardless of our sexuality, we all end up discovering a world different from the one our mothers experienced or expected for us. Opening up the possibility of exploring our own sexuality and the possibility of a life without a man is only an act of recognizing these generational differences. However, this act crushes the kind of femininity our mothers lovingly constructed for us. Not knowing any different, by reducing us to their expectations, our mothers have perpetuated the structure of *machismo* through a femininity that revolves around the relationship with men and the Catholic God.

### **Cathy Arellano “I believe en la mujer”**

As in the case of Cherríe Moraga in *The Hungry Woman*, the poetic voice in Cathy Arellano’s poem “I believe en la mujer” builds a relationship between a woman and her lover, the moon. Queering the moon is a *leitmotiv* found in writing by other Latina and Chicana authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Karen T. Delgadillo, among others. I believe the poetics behind the moon/lover is the active acknowledgment of the beauty and indispensable existence of the satellite’s light. By worshiping or making love to the moon, which in the Aztec tradition is described as the feminine force that drives our planet, Arellano focuses her attention on that other light in the sky. The moon is thus coded feminine in opposition to the male *star* that our solar system revolves around. The moon is often inaccurately perceived as naturally related to women because of the cyclical feminine reproductive system and related to mental instability or a brutish, less-than-human state of being—lunacy and werewolves are also associated with the



moon. Folkloric traditions and popular rumor alike fuel these ideas, and ultimately link femininity with the subhuman and insane, making for a disturbing picture of what it means to be a woman.

In this poem, Arellano constructs a personified moon that dares act upon “the taboo of menstruation.”<sup>32</sup> The poetic voice condenses three taboo elements associated with femininity: menstrual blood, pleasure, and desire:

La luna me chupa  
mi sangre  
inhales, exhales  
and ventures  
to the six directions.  
I bleed a pleasurable pain.  
I do not doubt  
that Christ died on the cross  
with nails in palm  
and *if* it were for

<sup>32</sup> In Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb’s anthology, *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, the editors claim there is no such thing as a “universal menstrual taboo,” but rather, “a wide range of distinct rules of conduct regarding menstruation” that differentiate across cultures and religions and change throughout time. Although ethnography has allowed us to be aware of the diversity of these “set[s] of rules,” the fact that in every culture and civilization exists a particular set of rules or parameters that either men or women should follow during a woman’s period, to me, still represents a universal taboo. As the editors demonstrate through their selection of works, in the west, menstruation has always had a negative connotation as it has been framed across multiple cultures as “the curse of Eve,” or a part of God’s punishment to women for Eve’s biblical fall. Hence, the notion of “pollution” in reference to menstruation has been the most central in cultural and anthropological analysis. Although they argue the various “taboos” on menstruation around the world are not always negative, like for instance in the Polynesian, where women are said to have “extrahuman powers” during these days. To me this is not necessarily a positive aspect, as the result of the ideological construction reaches the same result: society keeps distance from menstruating people because men are afraid they might use their “extrahuman powers” against them.

my sins to come,

I thank her.

Menstruating women are often considered dirty and unfit to socialize. Houses are still built in various communities where women are kept isolated during their menstrual cycle, and the practice of female circumcision continues robbing people with vulvas of the ability to take pleasure in sex.<sup>33</sup> Even in the Western world, white, middle class, female comedians to this day still joke that menstruation is the only topic they are asked not to talk about on stage for fear of backlash.<sup>34</sup>

Regardless, these same comedians claim the subject would not be taboo, gross or vulgar to talk about in front of an audience if men *had* to menstruate.<sup>35</sup> In so far as it can also be a physically debilitating moment in a woman's life, Arellano relates this moment of menstruation not only as sensual, but as a way pleasure can be enhanced. "I bleed a pleasurable pain," she writes. In this sense, the only *other* who can

<sup>33</sup> See Boddy, Janice (2007).

<sup>34</sup> Iliza Shlenzinger and Whitney Cummings are some of the American white female comedians that, despite being privileged within a first world country, have expressed that they are still expected to not speak about menstruation. Their comments on this matter echo the famous sarcastic question and answer posed by Gloria Steinem: "What would happen if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not? Clearly menstruation would become an enviable event."

<sup>35</sup> Recent research studies in ethnography of menstruation like Melisa Meyer's *Thicker Than Water: The Origins of Blood as Symbol and Ritual* traces menstrual taboos in relation to dirtiness, pollution and toxicity. Meyer explains that during the 1970s, British emeritus anthropologist Jean Sybil La Fontaine conducted ethnographic research on this topic in Bugisu, in Eastern Uganda, writing that, "a menstruating Gisu woman must keep herself from contact with many activities lest she spoil them." Thus, from the time of their first menstruation usually around 11 years of age, Gisu girls were to remain secluded during rituals, socialization and preparation of food. This discriminatory approach may lead some to believe such claim to marginalize women might be the product of native Uganda's ignorance; however, let's keep in mind Uganda was a British colony from 1894 to 1962. Moreover, Meyer discusses how, in the United States, Bela Schick, a Hungarian-American male pediatrician, chief of pediatrics at Mount Sinai Hospital in NYC and clinical professor at Columbia University proposed a theory on "menotoxins" in the 1920s, which posited the existence of a particular kind of toxic bacteria found in menstrual blood. These menstrual toxins could damage food if touched by women on their period or could pass on to men if they were to engage in "menstrual sex." His theory found its way to multiple developed countries, and, of course, was later on was dismissed. However, it is interesting to realize that menstrual taboos are deeply related to colonization and the development of white, heteropatriarchal institutions like medicine.

understand and relate to this element of a woman's body without censorship is, of course, another woman, and in Arellano's poem her lover is as invested in her bleeding sex as the moon to the sky. The moon/lover does not only literally travel around her partner's genitals in a way that defies conventions, but also—in a metaphorical sense—possesses a spatial and mystical awareness that defies the certainty of space as we know it. In the poem, the moon “ventures in the six directions” adding two more points of pleasure to the Western cardinal directions in order to relate to the universe. The other two directions are, in fact, part of the Native geographical traditions, like those belonging to Navajo people, but are also present in Buddhist philosophy.<sup>36</sup> As Rose von Thater-Braan, a Tuscarora-Cherokee scholar, explains, in Native and pre-Hispanic traditions each cardinal point represents an element of human identity, but aside from north, south, east and west, there is also *Above* representing “the place of beauty, balance, and the higher mind” (von Thater-Braan 9) and *Below* representing “our beloved Mother, the Earth” (11). In this way, thinking analogically, the poetic voice presents the lover/moon as able to fluctuate within realms unknown to the sun but also the moon, knowing more erogenous cardinal points than the sun. The act of love connects the poetic voice to the Earth (Below) in an equal sense of belonging to a higher place of beauty (Above), together referencing the motherland: the cause of longing, nostalgia or displacement for Chicanas.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> See Von Thater-Braan (2016) and De Silva (2016).

<sup>37</sup> Refer to chapter three for more on the concept of Aztlán, as well as Perez (1999) for more on Aztlán as a maternal imaginary in *The Decolonial Imaginary*.

Arellano radicalizes lesbian love by connecting menstruation to “pleasurable pain” and not a source of shame. After the poetic voice is able to bond the commonly equidistant elements of menstruation and pleasure, she takes a glimpse into what she has been taught under the Catholic tradition: guilt and shame. Christ is named as the poetic voice that interrupts her own pleasure and desire in the act, but the voice shifts into a beautiful but also radical use of language: “I don’t doubt Christ died on the cross/with nails in palms.” In the Catholic prayer, the verse should continue, “for our sins,” in this case alluding to the sin she has just committed by having sex with another woman. Nonetheless, the poetic voice makes evident it is not because of the sin of lesbian sex that Christ died, but perhaps because of the “coming” sin; that is to say, of taking pleasure in it. However, she rejects the shame and guilt that accompany such sins in this landscape, as well any of the consequences, stating: “and *if* it were for my sin to come,” emphasizing the conditional “*if*,” as if suddenly she does not believe in her pleasure as a sin, or even maybe doubting her own belief in Christ. The poetic voice alludes to the fact that *if* Christ could die because of what she is about to do and feel, then she would thank her lover for the ineffable experience of love and desire, and perhaps also for killing a God that would consider her pleasure a sin.

Then, the poem reverses the expectation of guilt into unapologetic agency, ultimately rejecting a belief system that no longer serves her, because if to exist as a woman who receives and gives pleasure to another woman is a sin, responsible for the death of God, then God must die. This should make us consider a hypothetical: if we read the poem thinking the author is a white, middle class, liberal woman,

would the reconfiguration of menstruation, pleasure and lesbian sexual satisfaction within Catholic dogma have a different impact? I argue that it would. Inhabiting a brown female body in the United States, in addition to transgressing the many boundaries of homophobia and Catholic dogma, everyday discrimination, and perhaps a lack of resources, fighting stereotypes, along with the desire to fit in among the Anglos, hoping to belong without facing ostracism from her own people, and wishing for her and her community to be seen as valuable to this country—these are all aspects that make her rejection of the ideology of sin more risky and, therefore, perhaps, more pleasurable for her to reject.

I argue then, love is intertwined with desire in this poem, but its climax is a new approach to self-love from the poetic voice. Arellano does this by diving into her own sexuality and her own pleasure and connecting with another body that resembles her own; this leads her to make peace with the political, religious and social conventions she has transgressed in order to experience a higher state of truth. Love is then, contrary to Badiou's theory, undoubtedly a political category that needs to defy a set of beliefs embedded in ideology in order for the subject to reach a higher state of freedom and existence. Love is always the search for truth and sometimes to achieve truthfulness; rebellion is necessary. Hence, in the case of this poem, love transcends God and society's judgment. The fact that the poetic voice allows herself to receive pleasure during menstruation is extremely meaningful, as it subverts the dirtiness that menstruation and womanhood are often associated with. As Castillo writes in her introductory essay, "Indeed through the Bible, we are taught that menstruation is a taboo, worthy of castigating rituals; woman is under

suspicion when she expresses sexual desire, and under no circumstances, not marriage or motherhood, should a woman be free to have an orgasm, because the Bible is anti-evolutionary” (29). Nevertheless, we are a different kind of being, and women’s menstruation is not the same as other animals.’ The heat, or successful reproduction, does not coincide with menstruation, but rather, as in Arellano’s poem, can become the instance where pleasure is enhanced and the body is free to feel.

Thus, this is not only a poem about pleasure, but about the bravery against the systems of belief we were taught in the face of love. In this way, the poem shatters the Catholic construction that female sexuality can only be seen as a vessel for life, *but not* for the creation of life itself. This is the reason female sexual pleasure is strictly related to sin, as Christ was born free from such sin. Chicanas often feel the desire to fit into the American collective without being judged by their families as “vendidas” or sold-out to Anglos, white-washed, “too liberated,” persons who rejects their Hispanic roots in order to fit in, taking sides with the oppressor. However, many Chicanas paradoxically feel that their sense of belonging and existence has been informed by the concept of womanhood as it relates to eventual motherhood. Here is another side to female power that is depicted in this poem: the act of wasting the gift of carrying life. The act of using one’s body only for pleasure, and even more so, for pleasure with another woman, disrupts the control society has always exerted on women’s sexuality by making us fear being socially ostracized, name-called. By allowing ourselves, as women, to be scared of such

judgments, we have also allowed our sexuality to be surveilled and punished by our own community.

In this sense, the poem not only conveys a sense of erotic dancing between Spanish and English as the code-switching thrusts smoothly, but also, the imagery of a non-reproductive pleasure that goes against the sacred dogma we, as either Mexicanas like myself, Latina immigrants or Chicanas; are raised to believe. By mentioning Christ in the middle of the poem, only to dismiss the authority of Catholic dogma, and then locating pleasure in the realms unknown to Western men—such as above and below as cardinal points that connect the self to the Motherland and beauty—Arellano elevates and praises the ability of another woman to give the unnamable act of sex during menstruation or the ultimate taboo for a woman: satisfaction and freedom.

The poem's title gathers a radical construction of faith, as the poet "believes" not in "the woman" but "in la mujer." This acknowledges the intersectional confrontations she embraces by confessing to her own erotic pleasure in the language that connects her to her roots. She uses the word "believe," typically only reserved to refer to belief in God, for a mere mortal that resembles herself. The foundation of a radical form of sacred love or agape allows the poet to propose a new belief system that disrupts her acquired Catholic concept of faith. As faith contains in itself a visualization of the future or hope for our desires to be met without our control, I argue, faith ever so slightly allows us to evade responsibility, as it implies there is an absolute source or an invisible force, we as women place our life into. The fact that, in this poem, the element of faith underpins the claim that the

poetic voice “believes” in the woman, references not only her lover, but herself. To me, this could be the equation that Emma Goldman died without solving, in so far as she expressed that the fear of not fitting into society made her cling in desperation to her intimate heterosexual relationships, while simultaneously, attempting through her political work and advocacy to re-edit the “family model” for other women. Goldman had “faith” in other women to build new forms of intimacy but did not “believe” it was possible for her to be free from socially approved models. This means she approached the politics of love *de afuera hacia adentro*, trusting her advocacy could make a difference outside for it to ultimately have an effect in her own approach to intimacy and love. However, if the love she preached was not the love she practiced, her writings and her advocacy on this subject lacked the belief in one woman (herself) thus making her work incomplete.



## Karen T. Delgadillo “deseo”

Desire is a strong feeling that supposedly good women should never show, but men are expected to act upon. Karen Delgadillo’s brave poem doubly appropriates this idea by using the Spanish in her title. It is not “desire” nor it is “deseo”. The title is neither capitalized nor anglicized. The title taps into a different kind of yearning, longing and passion as the word, when read out loud, forces a pout in the mouth in the final syllables (eo).<sup>38</sup> The bravery of Delgadillo’s poem resides in constructing desire through poignant images, sounds and an overall sensorial atmosphere. Reading the poem one can almost feel the heat and sweaty atmosphere, the warm air stuffed with longing. More importantly, it displays an irreverent or heretical (re)construction of the body of Christ. Delgadillo here rejects the fear of burning in hell, and instead embraces the flames, turning them into pleasure. It is not “desire” for Delgadillo, it is *deseo*. Her choice of words echo her mestiza experience. More importantly the concept of desire for Chicanas/Mestizas and Latinas as a social construct reiterated and policed, as Emma Pérez points out in *The Decolonial Imaginary*: “society designs the body, its desires, and more specifically lesbian desire” (123).<sup>39</sup> That is to say that there is, and has always been, an undeniable link between power and desire. Again, against Badiou’s theory, love

<sup>38</sup> When training as an actor, the importance of reading poetry and plays out loud before analyzing meaning references or tropes is paramount, as I was taught “every word taste different” meaning: the way a word modifies the actor’s body and gestures such as the mouth, connects the text to its meaning and the subjacent emotion.

<sup>39</sup> Emma Perez in *The Decolonial the Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* draws fascinating parallels in writing by Teresa de Laurentis, Michelle Focault and Sigmund Freud, Hayden White, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Chela Sandoval, among many other thinkers whose theories I never thought could coexist on the same page. Pérez uses precisely this strategy to unveil the theoretical frames that have constructed Chicano history in order to discover the voices that have been silenced by the colonizer’s methodologies, and the assumptions that led to the omission of women’s narratives from history, discovering what she calls “third space feminism.”

*is* political, as society punishes those who deviate from the laws of acceptable desire, converting the edges of pleasure into perversion. As Pérez argues, homosexuals (which still, in so many parts of the world silently or vociferously are hailed as deviants or criminals) are disciplined by “moral engineering” aiming to reconstruct their desire and their bodies to fit into society, or I would add, to be allowed into it:

i sit and read

numerous black symbols,  
making empty words in my head.

Each letter invites me to follow

its shape and curves  
like one of many ants  
covering a desert sandhill.

The fire licks in its cave of bricks

i hear the gentle snaps  
of its moistening tongue  
lapping the sap  
the sweetness  
from split eucalyptus.

My eyes are drawn to the flames

that danced upon your  
hot brown skin  
raining droplets.

With arms out-stretched

floating upon the white cloud beneath you;  
a childhood comforter faced down,  
along the grain of the hardwood floor  
and with rolling waves of desire,  
i descend upon your ocean.

We are a crucifix

fingers clasped in firm embrace  
spilling holy beads upon our bodies  
as tidal forces rolled our hips.

How the flames grew

evoking my own thirst  
for the liquid of your breasts,  
your cheeks,  
your neck,  
your navel,  
that met me with a small oasis,

And the enlarged shadows

pulsing against four walls of fire  
displaying our organ mass  
in motion.

Pérez asks, “How do we reinscribe our bodies with passions and desire when power and desire are so enmeshed?” (124). I argue that Chicanas like Delgadillo reconfigure our bodies through their poetry. Especially if, as Pérez claims, nationalism is the place where power polices desire and the voices of difference are silenced. Pérez adds, “This reemergence is the return of the repressed,” that is to say, when communities construct a pseudo revolution for the supposed betterment of the people but completely dismiss and obliterate other sexualities and “technologies of desire.” Hence, Karen Delgadillo’s poem is more pertinent than ever, especially in our political landscape, which I consider to be plagued with fake acceptance as a byproduct of political correctness.

The poem starts with the poetic voice acknowledging her subjectivity with the lowercase “i.” An unpretentious subject appears as physically inactive but her mind driving away into a far and seductive place where she is allowed to listen to the fire acting as a tongue making love to a “split eucalyptus.” The fire’s act of cunnilingus is described through arousing sounds and the vagina as an opening in the eucalyptus (a healing plant). The passionate images of the fire giving pleasure to the plant are constructed by sexual sounds, merging image and sound into sex: however, the seductive power of the fire is contained between the walls of a chimney. Still not free, the fire is only able to come out from the confines of the walls when the light and shadows are projected onto the skin of another brown woman. It is only then that the poetic voice places her desire on the other woman, craving even the small drops of sweat on her skin. The object of her desire is naked in the same position as Christ on the cross, and instead of clouds behind her, she

lays in a comforter that belongs to a time when our identity is not our own, but only the product of what we are taught, as well as being the most pure and innocent version of ourselves. The comforter is a fascinating element that is loaded with the weight of contradiction, as it alludes to a time that represents conflicting emotions painful yet mesmerizing as we try to understand and discover the world and ourselves. The naked woman resting like a crucifix on top of the comforter points out to another transgression (especially in the context of the heated atmosphere of desire) when the poetic voice takes the same Christ-like position on top of her lover--“we are a crucifix”--and compares the drops of sweat and vaginal fluids to “holy beads” of a rosary, emphasizing the sacredness of love. It is not the image of the son of God accepting torture and death in the name of love, but rather the removal of shame from pleasure. Thus, the poem radically humanizes love by confronting the “sinful” element of lesbian pleasure and desire, as well as questioning the concept of sacredness, in so far as the poem portrays a kind of love pure and natural as God’s love, but visually constructed in a way that, for some readers, would constitute the equivalent for heresy, as a couple of moaning lesbians are described as a crucifix. The “belief” in what is sacred and what is not, makes overwhelmingly evident the social regulatory aspect of love; turning poetry/writing into one of the few weapons against normalized desire.

The fact that the hip motion of the sexual act is referenced as “tidal forces” and the bodily fluids are converted into an “oasis,” emphasizes the natural aspect of desire, sex and love. Because of the truthfulness of these constructions, Delgadillo manages to be explicit in her imagery; yet there is no space for vulgarity. The

flames that have accompanied the couple from the beginning keep growing as well as her desire and the climax seen in the shadows, but still allowing the reader to see both of their clitorises as one.

It is fascinating to me, the way the poet is able to write about both the private, the sacred, the sinful and the uncomfortable in a way that conveys union and naturality. The description of such truthful and honest desire destroys judgment, which is also symbolized in the comforter and the references to the crucifix and the rosary.

I argue Delgadillo makes a powerful statement with her poem, which to me is the only possible way for love to free us, and not the other way around: the flames of hell must become the tongue of our desire. We will not burn in hell if we embrace pleasure and desire as naturally as men do, as well we should embrace judgement, only to reconstruct it. The fear of burning in hell for our sin, the guilt of original sin and the blame for the death of Christ does not hold to the main aspect of Christianity, which in fact is a message of love. Radicalizing the latter is what Delgadillo does by constructing paradise through flames. The flames that allude to the evil contained in hell is reversed in this poem, as it poses evil in the denial of freedom. Freedom in who and how we chose to love and in politicizing love, the poem brings to light the fact that one can neither live nor affirm her freedom without also affirming the freedom of others.

Contrary to Plato's delimitation of *eros* (sexual desire), *philia* (brotherly or sisterly love) and *agape* (affection or the love between God and humankind and vice versa) in *The Symposium*, Delgadillo proves such distinctions undermine the

wholeness of love by intertwining *eros* and *agape* in her poem. The act of writing about both results in the most powerful incarnation of *philia*, as she turns “the uncomfortable” (for our mothers) into beauty; achieving the ultimate power of *philia* is sorority. She makes other brown lesbian lovers exist and be seen through her writing without shame or guilt. Delgadillo does not attempt to deny the fact that religion powerfully affects our identity, for those of us raised in a Catholic home. Hence, re-writing love and homosexuality undeniably means to confront dogma. Instead of being ostracized by religion, self-love consists in reconfiguring whichever aspect of religion we want to practice and choosing which our own version of absolute love.

The poetic construction of nakedness in the poem, I argue, is *per se* a radical form of reminding the reader that the body is political, and not to forget nakedness has conveniently been synonymous with objectification and barbarity. Moreover, nakedness has a strict link between power and desire. Adeline Masquelier in the introduction to *Dirt, Undress and Difference* argues, “Nudity, in its revelatory nature, is not so much a state as a process that is carefully controlled and contained through a whole economy of artifice, power and desire” (19).<sup>40</sup> Take for instance the colonial imaginary that still resonates to this day, as the colonizers were fully clothed finding various tribes around the globe naked or exposing more skin, which led them to judge them as suspicious and barbaric, a reminder of the biblical reference to the expulsion from paradise of Adam and Eve and their covering their genitals out of shame for sinning: disobeying God the Father/Creator. The fact that

<sup>40</sup> For more on nakedness, desire and power see Masquelier (2005).

the poet writes “displaying our organ mass in motion,” which to me references both enlarged clitorises, radicalizes nakedness to the extreme, and renounces the idea of the clitoris as the “invisible” source of pleasure. The fact that the image refers to two clitorises, goes as far as the reappropriation of nakedness can. Nakedness also allows the poet to dismiss the factors that control love, such as class and gender. Without clothes there is no immediate visual judgment of an individual’s gender performativity or economic status. Consequently, freeing love and desire from these constructs reclaims the purity and truthfulness in desire.

### **Natashia López’s “From Between Our Legs”**

Natashia López’s poem “From between our legs” is a heartbreaking acknowledgment of the privileges Chicanas have in comparison to other women of color who reside in developing countries, who live in poverty, undocumented, or in locations where certain luxuries are unheard of. The poetic voice recounts the basic human needs she enjoys, turning them into luxuries in contrast to another women’s experience. Through these comparisons, the poetic voice acknowledges her “first world problems” as being almost ridiculous in comparison to different experiences of womanhood and menstruation from other (less privileged mestizas) just like her. However, the differences between her and other women, in one way or another, are erased by the fact that we all bleed every month. In the first world or the third, she acknowledges the fact that all women suffer the physical pain of menstruation and the aftermath of the taboo that comes with it. Nonetheless, it is not a poem about what some women have or what others do not, nor about the comforts or luxuries, nor even about the fact that no matter where, we all endure the same physical



symptoms and the same aftermath of fertility. More than a poem about menstruation and how some women go through it in precarious conditions and others in not so precarious ones, to me, this poem is about love. It is the kind of love neither Plato, Aristotle, Badiou nor Lacan fully understood. This kind of love is a complex one, and it is not just a sisterly love among women, it is not quite a filial love in terms of sorority. Rather, it represents the kind of behavior that enables others to claim their subjectivity and transcendence. The poem does not focus on a particular “type” of love, as it is certainly not erotic; nor mystical, as it does not involve a higher being. It is the kind of love that is political, that transcends geography and physicality and, rather than being an “event,” “an encounter” or “an experience of the world from the point of view of two rather than one” (Badiou 44), it is an action that takes others and oneself closer to freedom:

somewhere

in the third world

women bleed

wash their panties in the river

hang them between trees to dry

lie flat back on kitchen tables

and scream out babies

here

in the United States

I walk down Walgreen’s “feminine hygiene” aisle

searching for my favorite pad or tampon

maxi or thin slender or regular  
pregnant mothers attend birthing classes  
I fight for condom machines in bathrooms  
an Honduran woman vomits a clear white  
the pill  
makes the poorly nourished body sick  
I worry about bloating  
in El Salvador a mother  
takes her sun dry panties from the trees  
mine are stuck on the side of a washing machine  
with a sock and bra strap  
somewhere  
a woman is bending over in a field  
hot blood running down the side of her leg  
I feel it pouring  
over the edges of my pad  
everywhere/somewhere  
we bleed  
we were/are told we are witches  
our pain is our “duty”  
and it pours between our legs.

As I have argued in previous chapters, both Goldman and de Beauvoir believe women are conditioned because of their gender to love and be loved, within the

boundaries of societal parameters, in terms of what it means to be a “loving woman worthy of love,” what we, as women, must break free from in order to claim agency and equality. In her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir states that only “subjects” experience a true sense of love, not individuals who are objectified. In order to be subjects instead of objects, it takes effort, because it is simply easier to become inactive. The woman who embodies “transcendence,” for de Beauvoir, becomes accountable for having a voice and acquires the responsibility of reaching out to those who strive for freedom. Therefore, embodying transcendence also suggests accountability for “the other,” acknowledging and highlighting unequal experiences. This means freeing oneself from the ideological or societal constructs we have made our own and remain unquestioned. Then, I argue, the embodiment of transcendence has no truthfulness if it is not placed in action in favor of other’s visibility, empowerment, well-being and overall transcendence. That is to say that, for me, Natashia López’s poem embodies “transcendence” in so far as the poetic voice is a woman who uses her privilege (language) to distance herself from becoming an object, expanding her awareness and relating to others like herself. She writes:

I feel it pouring  
over the edges of my pad  
everywhere/somewhere  
we bleed  
we were/are told we are witches  
our pain is our “duty”  
and it pours between our legs.

The poetic voice relates her subjectivity to others, regardless of the differences of class, hardship, geography or privilege; she relates to other women within the same tradition (Latin American) and denounces the gendered structures that have kept them silent and invisible as well as the patriarchal constructions that have punished and surveilled their reproductive system. The verses “we were/are told we are witches” comprises hundreds of years of history that has marginalized women who have showed strength, power or knowledge. We are the same: we are contained and controlled, as well as entrapped, into belief systems that wish to limit our existence to a demand. We are forced into to accepting pain as our destiny and purpose in menstruation, pregnancy and motherhood. Where is the love in all this? I argue we should interpret this poem as one that challenges the traditional limits of love, in so far as the poet/poetic voice expands her range of awareness beyond the ego, questioning herself in what seems familiar, like going to Walgreens, having options and choices for “feminine products,” having machines to wash and dry her clothes, worrying about the superficial consequences of birth control, such as bloating. This means she looks into the self only to disarticulate the ego, and she more than just acknowledges her “luck,” but also questions her identity in regard to other Latinas, beyond space and differences, realizing the interconnectedness among us, women. In a sense, I feel as if the poetic voice sees herself in others and as a part of others as if saying “my pain is your pain and your pain is mine as well,” denouncing what is familiar, as if all women were *One*. This *One* has a louder voice when she names what is familiar to all: “we are called witches” or “we are taught our duty is pain,” questioning if we are here and there, anywhere, everywhere and why *this* remains

unchallenged and unchanged. The poem names what hinders our freedom and well-being: “pain as duty” not only referencing our sexuality and reproduction but also the pain we are taught to endure in relationships, marriage and even the workplace. I argue then that if the poet/voice manages to contain a sense of interconnectedness, it is because throughout the poem we are also in front of a process of dissolution of the ego in hopes of the benefit and visibility of others. Dare I say it, this action resembles the unfadable feeling of the greatest mystery to humankind: love.

As the poetic voice constructs images too familiar in the United States, such as the multiplicity of options, the access to education on birth control, when we see the image of a woman trying to get a condom from a machine and another vomiting what could be an abortion pill, the privilege that comes with the capacity to choose is intensified. When poem refers to the experience of “a Honduran woman,” or the difference in how other women wash out their menstrual blood in Latin America versus the way she does in the United States: “in Salvador a mother takes her sun dried panties from the trees.” Both references acknowledge the blood that unite us, the blood in our veins as mestizas and the painful blood we wash off in shame. Even more so, the subtext also points out the experience of undocumented women in the US who live in fear of being seen. The ones who would rather die than call an ambulance for the fear of being deported. The ones whose pain must remain hidden.

The wish to remain unseen, even when in pain, underscores the experience of other Latinas in the US that have no access to what the poetic voice asserts. Regardless, bleeding on a pad or bleeding out on nothing; in the following verses,

the poetic voice alludes to sorority and a common experience, which is : being dismissed and/or feared if we speak *and* bleed.

a woman is bending over in a field  
hot blood running down the side of her leg  
I feel it pouring  
over the edges of my pad  
everywhere/somewhere  
we bleed  
we were/are told we are witches  
our pain is our “duty”  
and it pours between our legs.

What pours between our legs is our “duty,” the voice asserts, but the fact that the word is between quotations winks at “the other” women, alluding to power, this being the common denominator between all witches throughout history. The transformation of duty into power as presented in the final verses of the poem propose the concept of power as another element that unite us as women, as love and power may be the content of what “pours between our legs”; consequently, re-signifying menstruation. Even more so, the use of the plural possessive pronoun “our” twice in the poem, marks the common magic between women and the dissolution of the ego by insisting that only through achieving dignity for our own bodies, those who come after us can potentially be closer to true freedom.

## **Against the Matrix**

As I came to understand through the analysis of the poems presented in this chapter, lesbian love is still, undeniably, seen by many as an act of rebellion, but it is in fact writing about lesbian love and eroticism which will collaborate into building a society in which this kind of poetry can be as normal and promoted as heterosexual literature. This is the reason why Chicanas fight through their poetry to radicalize and reconstruct their own experience of love against judgment, re-signifying the concepts that are innately attached to love, such as nudity, pleasure, desire, menstruation, faith, shame and guilt. In order to voice their experience of love, they renounce the “matrix of love” in the sense of what their mothers have taught them, the values and systems women have reinforced and the definition of womanhood they have to abide by and are expected to follow. It is non gratuitous that the word “matrix” comes from the latin *mater* (mother), *matris* (womb) and in old French “bleeding female” (Merriam Webster). Chicana lesbian poetry portrays an effort to challenge “The Mother”, both symbolically and literally. As painful as it is, their construction of love does not always strive for freedom and equality. The mother is not the enemy though, in the literal sense, but rather both theoretically and in life, a concept we are forced to reconfigure or transgress in order to love freely, both ourselves and others.

#### **Chapter IV: The Politics of Love, Pleasure and Pain**

In this chapter, I will first focus on a comparative reading of the protagonists of *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Hungry Woman* (Medea and Estrella) in order to establish the foundations for a reading of the three poems I have previously analyzed. My reading of the novel and the play establishes the need for a shift in the feminist agenda, which should not only focus on dismantling sexual oppression, but I argue, should question the politics that relegate women's pleasure and pain to the margins. Why is our pleasure and pain silenced and uncomfortable? By the end of this chapter I will establish what I believe are the reasons for this censorship and the various ways the authors I chose for this project resist silence.

The novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helena María Viramontes and the play *Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* by Cherríe Moraga speak volumes about how women can change the way we form affective bonds. Even more, they offer a rationale for the times we live in, arguing that it is time to make unpopular, anxious, and difficult but honest choices. Viramontes and Moraga suggest that, as women, today, shaking patriarchal structures means more than just talking about gender, sexuality, equal pay or sharing the household responsibilities; for both authors it goes far deeper than that. They invite us to question what sustains patriarchal ideologies. In this chapter, I argue that Catholic and Aztec dogma serve as moral landscapes that limit the ideal way Latinas, Mexicanas and Chicanas in particular should love and be loved. Catholic dogma's role in limiting women to maternity,



servitude and sacrifice has been well criticized and documented.<sup>41</sup> However, surviving Aztec foundational myths also contribute to these patriarchal and limiting ideologies of womanhood. Both sets of narratives, as I will show in my analysis of Viramontes' and Moraga's respective works, are embedded in our ideological coding and have established our understanding of love and motherhood as systems of subjugation. Thus, although the colonization of Latin America has made us prone to Catholic dogma, Aztec mythology also has its limitations. I am aware that not all dogmas are created equal. However, I do believe that dogmas are informed and implemented through a subtle mechanism of force, insofar as that a breach from

41 For more on the politics of love, see Cherríe Moraga's, *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (103-117), as well as her argument on the urgent need for Chicanas to "make familia from scratch" in *Giving up the Ghost*. Refer also to Anna Castillo's essay on sexuality previously cited in this dissertation, "La Macha: Toward a New whole self," Emma Perez "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Chicana Survivor," as well as "Interview with Anna Castillo by Martha Navarro"; the three texts are found inside the book *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About*. See Lourdes Argüelles' "A Survey of Latina Immigrant Sexuality" presented at the National Association for Chicano Studies Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico, March 29-April 1, 1990 (Available upon request directly from NACSC). Refer to Adrienne Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, which although published 39 years ago, does not deal directly with the Chicana experience, but the text serves as a theoretical basis for understanding heterosexuality as a political institution that disempowers women, as well as the need for feminists and academics to dismantle heteronormativity. On gender and sexuality, one must always go back to the Judith Butler's work, especially *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, particularly in regard to the difference between gender being performed vs. gender being performative, which is paramount to the understanding of the politics of sexuality and love in a larger scope. Butler argues that by saying gender is performed we refer to the idea that we are "role playing" or "acting" our gender and that our "acting" or our "role playing" are crucial to the gender that we are and the gender that we present to the world; to say that gender is performative attests to the fact that for something to be performative means it produces a series of effects and iterations that consolidate an impression of "being" a man or "being" a woman, even though gender is NOT intrinsic or innate to a human being, but rather a phenomenon produced and reproduced throughout history to reinforce gender normativity, and consequently, heteronormativity as well. Butler analyzes how gender norms are established and policed, as well as the possible ways to disrupt them and overcome the police function. Gender is culturally formed therefore it is also a domain of agency and freedom. A mandatory reading is *Methodology of the Oppressed* by Chela Sandoval, especially Part IV "Love in the Postmodern World" in which Sandoval dialogues with Roland Barthes' text *A Lover's Discourse* and other canonical male thinkers such as Jaques Derridá in order to resignify existing vocabulary and philosophical terminology hoping for new forms of consciousness and agency to arise. The reading of Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider*, pp.53-60, is also a mandatory reading as a one of the most cited texts on this subject, which for the same reason I refrain from doing in this dissertation.

dogmatic expectations not only carries a stigma but alludes to punishment, or more literally: hell.

Comparing *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* offers lessons on the relationship between discourse and action with respect to dismantling the fundamental aspects of religious dogma. Comparing these texts is particularly fruitful because, while Viramontes' novel uses almost no dialogue, Moraga's text, as a play, is constructed almost entirely with dialogue. When dialogue appears in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Viramontes uses it to expose the working dogma that Estrella challenges through action. On the other hand, in *Hungry Woman*, Medea's character gets lost in a series of verbal exchanges which take her nowhere. As we will see in the following section, in Moraga's dramatic text, stage directions play an important role in the character development of Medea, the protagonist. Words betray Medea. Yet, in the wake of her betrayal, Medea, like Estrella, resorts to action, although these also have devastating consequences for her character.

Viramontes and Moraga bet on reconfiguring the mother as a master figure that can break our inertia, pushing us to freedom. However, the need for a master figure at all is cause for concern. Is the world ready for the responsibility that comes with the freedom of establishing our own paradigms? Are we ready to subvert the concept of female sacrifice in order for history not to repeat itself? Are we willing to renounce the pleasure and comfort of *the love that seems familiar* and the social expectations for women in order to feel we have a place in society? These are the

guiding questions that configure my reading of the conversations and oppositions between Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus* and Moraga's *Hungry Woman*.

### **The Chicana Wave**

Moraga and Viramontes change the terms of faith and prayer, displacing their function onto the protagonists' actions. Their characters' actions push back against the religiosity of the Chicano Movement in the United States and oppose the oppressive role of religion within Mexican and U.S. culture and state ideology.<sup>42</sup> Hence, these texts, like much feminist literature written by Latinas and Chicanas during the second half of the twentieth century, suggest that Chicanas and Latinas must dissect and challenge the mythical and the religious limits that establish the double otherness being a mestiza and a woman; they must resist peacefully to the savage capitalist order. For the Chicana/o community, Catholicism goes hand in hand with many other traditions that make up Mexican identity and connect them to the motherland. To reject certain aspects of these traditions or to question certain aspects of the dogma constitutes an existential conflict. If we go back to de Beauvoir's fundamental dichotomy of subject vs. object, we may shed light on how our own cherished values, informed by religion and legends/myths are the obstacles to our own liberation.

Simone de Beauvoir's importance as a feminist thinker is not limited to her role in the Second Wave movement. Although Third Wave feminism has introduced issues of intersectionality and the complexities of the relationship between gender

<sup>42</sup> The Chicano movement took the Virgin of Guadalupe as its flag, and the founding fathers of the United States inserted in The Constitution, that the Nation must trust and be guided by God. If, as Benjamin Franklin said: "God governs in the affairs of men," but, who governs in the affairs of women?

and sexuality, and the so called “Fourth Wave” has made use of technology to spread awareness of these issues and make more evident the fact that the personal is political; still, the construction of intimacy has not been revised quite carefully enough by either movement. In particular, despite the fact that the #MeToo movement has exposed a series of abuses, which was an immense triumph, it has failed to question all the complexities behind the collective unconscious that led to such abuses and has not traced a plan for what happens next. I believe we should be asking ourselves, What have we chosen to believe in? Why? How much of those beliefs about love are merely unquestioned iterations?

The texts that I analyze throughout this dissertation advise us to stop and return to the fundamentals of feminism, especially to the early writings of the Second Wave movement. Latina authors and thinkers, such as Viramontes and Moraga, whose careers span the second half of the twentieth century and extend into the present, advise us to go back to what might, for some, present a nuisance to the movement, but actually make it stronger. By this I mean the awareness that by contesting the patriarchy, we should also aim at dismantling the dogmas and myths that inform our affective bonds.

### **Mythology in Action**

Evangelization, in other words, forced conversion to Christianity in La Nueva España, was an act of violence. The full story of Guadalupe was first published by the Criole priest Miguel Sánchez in 1648.<sup>43</sup> Many other sources by evangelized Indians, forced to renounce their own faith, give testimony about

<sup>43</sup> See Sanchez (1648).

Guadalupe. Our knowledge of Aztec faith and traditions today is the result of scholarship by primarily white, male clergymen or anthropologists. The received knowledge of Coatlicue is a case in point. As a matter of fact, the first time the interpretation of Coatlicue's myth appears in writing is in the *General History of the Things of New Spain*, also known as *The Florentine Codex*, written and compiled by the Franciscan Friar Bernardino de Sahagún. Coatlicue here is deprived of her individuality, first appearing as "the mother of the Aztec Patron deity, Huitzilopochtli." Although such histories as Sahagún's provide valuable information on Aztec culture during the early colonial period, they distort and disfigure indigenous belief systems, bringing them closer to Christianity. For example, in Sahagún's account of the Coatlicue myth, as she sweeps the Coatepec temple, Coatlicue finds a feather and puts it inside of her apron. Coatlicue's immaculate conception of Huitzilopochtli, the Sun God, echoes the story of the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception of Jesus, the son of God. Looking back at Aztec mythology as if it were outside of Christian dogma is to ignore how these myths, too, have been colonized.

After the early period of the Spanish Conquest, Coatlicue's sculpture was buried and later uncovered in 1790. After the sculpture's recovery, Antonio León y Gama, a Creole astronomer interested in Aztec culture, wrote *Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras que se hallaron en la Plaza Principal de México*. Unfortunately, he misinterpreted Coatlicue's figure, arguing that it belonged to Teoyaomiqui, Goddess of Flowers. Shortly thereafter, the sculpture was buried again as it was taken to be a symbol of paganism. Finally, Coatlicue was uncovered

again in the twentieth century<sup>44</sup> and more expansively analyzed within the context of other Aztec sculptures. New theories that contradicted León y Gama's emerged, and recent scholarship has suggested that Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue's daughter, beheaded her mother in order to explain the two facing forked-tongued snakes curling around the figure's neck (Coatlicue's sculpture is now exhibited at the Museo de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City). According to some scholars, snakes symbolize blood in Aztec iconography. Hence, Coatlicue was first thought to be decapitated, the snakes crowning her head as a representation of blood coming out of her neck. However, the myth never mentions Coatlicue being decapitated, and some recent scholarship has attempted to explain this incongruity through another, recently found, smaller statue of Coatlicue without the snakes around her neck. New interpretations suggest the Aztecs believed that four eras (or suns) took place before the era we currently live in, and that several female deities (including Coatlicue) sacrificed themselves to put the son/Sun into motion, allowing all life and time to continue its reign. This is *Stabat Mater* in all of its glory! If this interpretation of Coatlicue holds any ground, which I believe it does, the implication is that, even if history has considered Coatlicue as a deity that, like Medea, represents the power of creation and destruction, the Aztec goddess is also a maternal figure who sacrifices herself for her child's survival.

If we analyze the three main aspects of the myths of Medea, Coatlicue and the Virgin, we come face to face with the patriarchal notion of femininity as of devotional femininity: the wife or lover who caters to her male partner's needs and

<sup>44</sup> See León y Gama (1792).

as a mother sacrifices herself. This precisely is the notion that has been handed down through religious dogma. Hence, women's affective bonds with each other are established and surveilled based on proximity to these archetypes. As Julia Kristeva points out, numerous groups of radical feminists after the second wave have rejected motherhood for many different reasons. Some women have turned their backs on motherhood, or have been unable to access it, irrespective of their ideological positions. Others have identified the abuses within the institution of marriage as subjection and reject motherhood altogether in order to break with the idea that womanhood is only tangible through motherhood. I, like Kristeva, argue, that by doing so feminists still unconsciously accept the traditional representations of femininity related to us through these dogmatic myths.

Moraga's and Viramontes' texts, however, point to a way out of this double bind. For instance, Moraga's Medea, whose name is eponymous for the patriarchal accounts of the classic myth, casts her status as mother and woman in doubt when she kills her son Chac-Mool. Whether it is Euripides' play, Apollonius' *Argonautica* or Hesiod's *Theogony*, the similarities between these versions of the myth suggest that Jason was successful in his enterprise to become king because of Medea's interventions using magic, sorcery and her intelligence. As it happens in life and mythology, Jason abandons Medea for Glauce, daughter of the king of Corinth. Jason continues to use women to advance his political power, casting them aside as they no longer serve him; Medea understands this. According to Euripides and others, Medea's anger and feelings of betrayal push her to kill Glauce and two of the children she bore Jason, depriving him of his actual and possible heirs. Although

there are various versions of what happened after this event to Medea, Euripides uses the *deus ex-machina* device to save Medea, letting her fly back to Athens in a golden chariot sent by her grandfather, the Sun God, Helios.<sup>45</sup> Although many accounts of Medea's life after her escape exist, none are happy endings. Nevertheless, the actions that Medea takes to defy her position as mother and woman undermine the broader patriarchal expectations of her, and the framing of the myth altogether.

Estrella takes action in a different way. Both Estrella and Medea resort to action when words (dialogue, sacred texts, myths or prayer) fail them in their attempts to chart a new future. In *The Hungry Woman*, Medea sacrifices herself by killing her only child, for the sake of her people and the future of Aztlán in order for Jason to be left without a substitute (an heir) who will continue the fascist misogynist order. In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Petra's continual self-sacrifice pushes Estrella to seek new paths for herself and her community. Estrella learns from Petra's example and turns away from the Christian god that spurns her mother's devotion. Estrella's vicarious education (and rejection of a woman's lot in life) persuades her to open the path to a new kind of womanhood that rejects the *Stabat Mater*. Thus, Estrella, who parts the figurative ocean (opening the automatic glass doors as magic for her younger siblings) leads the youth into a new kind of exodus.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Despite Medea's ties to Helios, it is important to remember she is only part deity. Moraga draws a parallel between Coatlicue and Medea because both are often revered as goddesses of creation and destruction.

<sup>46</sup> Estrella's parting of the hospital's sliding doors is a metaphor for Moses' parting of the waters in the flight from Egypt.



As we saw in Viramontes and Moraga, Estrella and Medea are master figures that shake the matrix of love, although neither of them is able to fully reap the rewards of their independence within the respective imaginaries of the texts. These characters sacrifice themselves in such a way that seems antithetical to the dogmatic expectations imposed upon them in order to disturb patriarchal notions of family and reproduction. Moreover, they take on roles in diametric opposition to the other main female characters within the texts, Petra and Luna. Whereas Petra's and Luna's inaction and unquestioning acceptance of their fate allow them to inhabit the dogmatic repression that their counterparts escape, Medea and Estrella refuse to remain inactive. Estrella and Medea are fictional characters, yes, but they force us to look outside, and perhaps pay close attention to women in the world who bring catastrophe upon themselves in order to awaken us from our implicit beliefs and presuppositions about intimacy in the private sphere.

### **Mothering and Dogma**

In this section, I would like to reflect on the deities that Petra and Medea pray to and why. Both characters, as mothers, are willing to risk everything for their children. Both go to extreme lengths to make sure their children are safe and they both pray for a supreme being to intercede and help them in their efforts. Petra prays to Jesus but only acknowledges the Virgin of Guadalupe, without praying to her. As we know, Jesus' story has primarily been transmitted through the New Testament, a text written by twelve men, the Apostles. The Virgin of Guadalupe, on the other hand, despite her emergence through early Catholic accounts of life in Nueva España, is an appropriation from the Virgin Mary by the colonized people of Nueva

España following forced evangelization during the conquest. Guadalupe is “La Virgen Morena,” or the dark-skinned virgin, and physically resembles the people of Nueva España instead of the whitened, Europeanized Virgin Mary—even of the one of the same Guadalupe name that was worshiped in Spain before the Conquest. However, what is of interest to this project is how these characters reinterpret these myths to articulate a new religion that responds to their histories and spiritual needs.

Moraga cuts ties with the collective unconscious of the idealized mother that Christianity held as a flag, which has put female identity in a crisis in regards to the bond between love and the maternal, or as Kristeva would put it, “the identity of the unnamable,” elaborating that:

By “maternal” I mean the ambivalent principle that derives on the one hand from the species and on the other hand from a catastrophe of identity which plunges the proper Name into that “unnamable” that somehow involves our imaginary representations of femininity, non-language, or the body. Thus, Christ, the Son of man, is in the end “human” only through his mother: as if Christic or Christian humanism could not help being a form of maternalism (which is precisely the claim that has been made repeatedly, in a characteristically esoteric fashion, by certain secularizing tendencies within Christian humanism). Yet the humanity of the Virgin mother is not always evident [as] Mary is distinguished from the human race, for example, by her freedom from sin.” (134)

In many cultures the sexuality of love is erased in messianic figures like Jesus, so they may be brought into the world as pure or untainted, as in the Virgin Mary and

Coatlicue's stories of immaculate conception. These stories erase the affective bond as a sexual bond in the attempt to imagine conception as a sexual exchange of emotion. Instead, these narratives ultimately serve to demonize sexuality and the women who do not, and cannot, conceive their children without engaging in sex. Kristeva explains these myths by stating that the epithet "virgin" applied to Mary in fact derives from an error of translation: Kristeva poignantly states:

For the Semitic word denoting social-legal status of an unmarried girl the translator substituted the Greek Parthenos, which denotes a physiological and psychological fact, virginity. It is possible to read this as an instance of the Indo-European fascination (analyzed by Georges Dumézil) with the virgin daughter as repository of the father's power (182).

This error of translation, as Kristeva explains, is in synch with the Greek and Jewish patriarchal structure, which, abstracted from its origins, has come to oppress women as sexual beings and as mothers. Western Christianity neglected to correct this error of translation, and projected its own fantasies onto it, thereby producing a potent imaginary construct of femininity.

In the final scene in *The Hungry Woman*, as Chac-Mool's ghost guides Medea to the afterlife, Moraga alludes to the fact that for a new era to exist, for the history of oppression not to repeat itself, Medea should not be defined by the sacrifice of her son, but rather her *continued* sacrifices that lead to her ultimate act of love and rebellion: filicide. Moraga would have us understand that Medea's story should be defined *not* by her son's life and death, but by her own sorcery, knowledge and radical actions, which made her such a powerful figure to begin

with. At first glance, Medea seems to revindicate Petra, suggesting that Petra's actions paved the way for Estrella to emerge and chart a new course forward. However, Petra is not like Medea. Petra's self-sacrifice only serves to appease and empower a God who pays her no mind. Medea's prayers to Coatlicue, although addressed to an indigenous goddess, are also unsuccessful. However, her actions in light of her divine abandonment redeem her character (in her own eyes) as she refuses to let her son follow in his father's footsteps. Moraga's Medea ends up tragically imprisoned in a psychiatric ward but lives on her own terms and takes actions into her own hands. She sacrifices the son of God herself, actively changing the course of history.

If social reform starts at the individual level, then each woman *must* decode the narratives that have been taught to us as sacred in order to create new ones. The texts I have analyzed in this chapter function as metanarratives that go far beyond identity politics of femininity. They are intellectual and creative endeavors that focus on the actions women have taken, and must keep taking, in order to break away from the oppressive comfort of dogma. I am not saying the new literature written by Chicanas and Latinas in the United States must become new sacred texts, nor do I believe that each iconoclastic character's new religion should be adopted by all. Rather, the importance of these narratives lies in the way they invite reflection on the relevance, utility or validity of the stories, myths and legends we have believed as sacred.<sup>47</sup> They offer us a way to *actively* challenge the stories we

<sup>47</sup> Hence the importance of literature and the inclusion of texts written by Latinas/os in schools and the US scholastic canon.

tell ourselves in order to find the truth. By transgressing the ideas of the sacredness of the wife, her motherly love, and the sacrifices she is expected to make, these authors catalyze change in the cultural logic of patriarchy.

### **Contemporary Implications and Ways Forward**

Reflecting upon the dynamics of the private space is a pivotal point to address socially on a larger scale. These reflections entail questioning the almost pathological oppressive structures that reduce women's lives to their narrow roles as lovers, wives or mothers. Moreover, these reflections must also take into account how oppressive structures transcend the limits of nation, race, class and gender. My own research points out the fact that women, on both sides of the border, even in the most economically privileged spheres, are unable to leave their husbands because they fear for their survival. Paradoxically, many women also end up enduring the abandonment of the partner, just as Petra does in *Under the Feet of Jesus*. On both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, women of all backgrounds cling to the sense of belonging that partnership affords them, just as Emma Goldman wrote in the early part of the twentieth century. Why are Goldman's concerns still our concerns today? Why is this still an issue? The Judeo-Christian construction of the wife and mother, in addition to foundational pre-colonial Aztec and Greek classical legendry and mythology, reinterpreted through the trans-Atlantic colonial process, are deeply ingrained in our social understanding of the self and the political structures that govern us. They all have been part of the construction of our identities. Regardless of religious identification, stories such as "the mother triad" have become so deeply ingrained in our culture that they have become almost genetic.

I do not wish to suggest that all women should renounce religion, or that religion itself has no place in our society, nor that we should strive for a moral nihilist relativism. However, I do believe the current set of narratives, legends and myths, that depict female love are no longer useful, even though they made their way to us through the lenses of white men. In the words of neuroscientist Sam Harris, “By believing in metaphorical truths such as the sacred texts to help us navigate life, [it] is not useful anymore” (120). Unfortunately, it is not as simple as just removing the narratives that govern our tradition. Unfortunately, to me, Sam Harris and the so-called Four Horsemen of Atheism<sup>48</sup> disregard the importance of religion for the migrant farm workers who pick the organic strawberries they eat at the fancy restaurants they attend after their conferences. Their views about the dogmatism of religion fails to take into account *how* such myths and dogmas are used by people who lead very different lives from theirs. Harris’ arguments cannot hold if we try to apply them for marginalized and persecuted communities, stripped from the claim to their lands, communities that have little to hold onto other than God, like the characters in *The Hungry Woman* and *Under the Feet of Jesus*. When you have no land to call your own, you are persecuted. When not even your basic human needs are covered, how can you give up the one thing that gives you the strength to wake up and carry on? If today there are white, educated, privileged men in the social sciences questioning the necessity for these sacred stories, it does not

<sup>48</sup> In 2007 four academics in the fields of neuroscience and philosophy filmed a landmark discussion about modern atheism. The video went viral and the transcript of their conversation became a book published by Penguin Random House by the title: *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation that Sparked an Atheist Revolution* (2019); with new essays from the four participants: Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennet, propelling new views and questions on dogma, religion and morals that reached a mainstream audience outside academia.

make us more or less, better or worse (as intersectional feminists) to listen to them, but it might help us contextualize their theories within our own history and experience as brown female bodies in the United States. What use does religion serve for Chicanas, Mexicanas and Latinas? What can substitute the sense of comfort that faith and belonging in religion gives to the ones that remain invisible within the American imaginary? These are the questions that we must answer in order to fully turn away from Christian dogma without demonizing those that practice the religion as a means of survival.

Perhaps the answer lies in using the same mechanisms that we use to contest literary texts. If Latinos/as and Chicano/as in the US, who are obliged to support their families instead of studying, were able to read and write their own stories, perhaps the privileged position of the “sacred stories” would be displaced by narratives deeply and directly related to their own experiences. Viramontes tells us, only a few, like Estrella, can make a change. In the end, my analysis throughout this dissertation lends itself to a demand for action and change in social policy, as art and literature can greatly influence our actions and sense of purpose and our belief systems, just as legends, myths and sacred books have done in the past thousands of years. I argue the need for more literature that questions the dogmatic Latino/a and Chicana/o existence and more access to such stories. Therefore, I believe it is our duty as academics to relate our work to a more practical understanding and mission for change, one that aims towards the well-being and freedom of our people in the great country that once was our indigenous land. That is a responsibility that we must not relinquish as privileged individuals who are paid to teach and think,

especially today, given the possibility of making use of a more interdisciplinary approach to literature and philosophy that can help question our biases and enrich our dialogues.

Today, neuroscientists question if there is still a need for a universal ethos forced upon by dogma and religion. In Christianity God is “the Verb,” or a presence that must be manifested through faith. How many Chicana/o farm workers, house cleaners, dishwashers and other members of the community struggling to survive have had the access or opportunity to read the sacred texts? Despite their many and varied approaches to these texts (not limited to reading) they continue to believe. Their ideas of the religion, taught and reinforced from generation to generation, acquire different meaning through devotion beyond scripture. Nevertheless, there are individuals who dare to disrupt the universal beliefs of religion and dogma, and the traditional place of women within the structure. Thus, in an ideal society this community must have access to plays such as Moraga’s and novels such as Viramontes’ in order to pass on a new set of texts that can echo the Hispanic experience in the United States and allow for a shift in consciousness. Of course, this easier said than done. However, now, after seven years of attending Dr. Nicolás Kanellos’ lectures and working at the Recovery Project and Arte Público Press, I sense the urgency of their mission. One thing is to rationally understand the need for a more inclusive literary corpus in American schools and to disrupt the American literary canon, and another thing is to actually manifest the enormous positive impact that such actions could have, not only within the Hispanic community, but within the entirety of the United States. Although the results of such endeavors



remain to be seen, I strongly believe that such a program must be based on personal and local needs, rather than academic preoccupations. The impact of our work must continue outside our offices and universities, through the halls of Congress and the classrooms of public elementary, middle schools and high schools.

Some may debate the benefits of youth in the United States reading Hispanic literature, but Hispanic representation in school curriculums has already proven to positively impact society. Or is it not obvious that underneath our social and cognitive modus operandi there lies a net of symbolic and dramatic representations? In the history of every culture lies a foundational narrative that helps it make sense of the world. In every religion from Judaism, Christianity, Scientology to Mormonism and Hinduism, a layer of fictional representations allows us to relate to God, family and our community.

Consequently, I argue that in the particular case of Chicanas in the United States, their affective bonds are codified by layers of inherited dogma that must be broken and transformed, unless we wish to continue in a never-ending cycle of “abject slavery to love” (Goldman). The solution then, is not only to analyze and deconstruct foundational stories, but to spread and incentivize new ones.

### **Theorizing the poetics of hope and romantic love**

Chela Sandoval in *Methodologies of the Oppressed* states that while Roland Barthes writes about love emphasizing the process of “falling in love” as a puncture of passage, “third world writers” (as she calls them naming Guevara, Fanon, Anzaldúa, Emma Perez, Trinh Minh-ha and Cherríe Moraga), “similarly understand love as a breaking through whatever controls in order to find understanding and

community” (140). Sandoval explains that in Anzaldúa’s work one can trace “hope toward some promise land.” Sandoval states that although with different approaches, “third world writers” who theorize social change, understand “love as hermeneutic, as a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subjects, regardless of social class, toward a different mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement” (139). To me, the hermeneutics of love are made visible through the poetic language because, in itself, it does not conform to the structure of prose, neither to its colloquial aspect. What I encounter upon my reading of Natasha López’s poem “From between Our Legs” is as a common identity traced by the poetic voice resignifying the load and meaning of the words “everywhere” and “somewhere.” Both words, one next to the other, describe and make visible other Latinas and emphasize the shared experience of womanhood tied to menstruation and pain; the geographical paradox of “everywhere/somewhere” bounds the women presented in the poem to the same homeland, although not as literal one. “Our land” is presented as “somewhere” that is “everywhere” and at the same time “nowhere.” The longing for a land to claim their own is present in the poem like it is present in Moraga’s play and Viramontes’ novel. However, the poet does not dwell on the “no place,” but rather denounces the common oppression linked to the politics of love, a sense of belonging that transcends citizenship. The poetic voice asserts we are made to believe “pain is *our* duty” (my emphasis), after constructing the subjectivity of different women from various backgrounds but the same Hispanic roots. Pain is presented as socially constructed and policed, when she relates it to “duty,” as the definition of the word

encompasses “an obligatory task, conduct or service that arises from one’s position” (Merriam Webster Dictionary). The poet unveils there are practices that control our experience of menstruation and, consequently, our experience of sex and pregnancy. When López writes, “we were/we are told we are witches/ our pain is our duty and it pours between our legs,” she correlates “pain,” “blood” and the title “from between our legs,” alluding to women’s sexuality and fertility; but more importantly, she speaks of the vagina as a demonized area controlled and objectified by stories instead of it being the “territory” where love takes place, where it comes to life and from where all love is born. Although she asserts “we are told” whatever happens between our legs, even the pain, is an obligation that serves something or someone in control, she subverts exactly *that* which “we are told,” thus evidencing a normalized narrative and shifting it into the source of a different kind love, the one that unites us women, as López resorts to the repetition of the pronouns “we” and “our” as poetic tropes. Natasha López embraces a different kind of love, the one that Chela Sandoval describes as being that which identifies and breaks the practices of control in order to reach understanding and unity. “The promise land,” in Anzaldúa’s term, in this poem, is therefore not outside the self, but can be placed within the self.

Sandoval also explains that the language of lovers naming it “the lover’s speech” can puncture through the everyday narratives that tie us to social time and space, “to the descriptions, recitals and plots that dull and order our senses insofar as such social narratives are tied to the law” (140). I believe Sandoval is referring to what I previously referred to as “the matrix of love” and “the acquired systems of

belief.” The “lover’s speech” in the previously analyzed poems, “I believe en la mujer” and “From between Our Legs,” break away from religious and traditional narratives that shame Chicana lesbians, transforming “the lover’s speech” into the poetic speech. It is through reconstructing stories and beliefs that “the bleeding” (both literally and metaphorically) is made visible. I argue then, the blood presented in the poems, both as menstruation and as a metaphor for the expulsion of dogma, shame and contest societal narratives; this is what enables the texts to theorize on the political category of love. That is why for Barthes (as explained by Sandoval) the form of romantic love that punctures meaning allowing a gentle hemorrhage, combined with risk and courage, “can make anything possible” (140). Although in the poem “From between Our Legs” the poet denounces romantic love, it is converted from *eros* into *agape*; and it is in this transformation that meaning is punctured.

I argue, not only romantic love nor the “lover’s speech” can cause a puncture in the “matrix of love,” as in Arellano’s poem “I believe en la mujer,” but also writings that envision a different kind of love, such as López’s poem “From between Our Legs” and texts which portray a supposedly “questionable” kind of love: cruel and unfathomable (like Medea’s), seemingly selfish and rational (like Estrella’s), or “heretic” (but sacredly orgasmic), like Delgadillo’s.

Hence, if we go beyond the most talked about kind of love, romantic love, and allow ourselves to understand different and radical approaches to what we are taught the love for God, our mothers, our children, our lovers, our land and our fathers should be like, we can detach from the stories that police our love. Then, the

only questions left are still, What is love? Is it necessary? Is it all we need?--in the words of The Beatles. Or is it only a feeling?--as in the lyrics of the rock band The Darkness.

### **The power of Eros**

It is important to consider that “romantic love” has been the most inspiring element in all art and most philosophes of love (in western culture). The all-encompassing paradoxes of romantic love portrayed throughout history as marvelous, intoxicating, soul crushing and heartbreaking evidence the fact that romantic love is able to shift even our deepest instincts of self-preservation. Regardless, neither science nor psychology have concluded that romantic love has a purpose, and although the twentieth century and the last couple of decades finally offer various examinations of love from the optic of intersectional feminism, including the gay and lesbian experience, I believe there is still a canonical understanding of romantic love. For instance, in ancient Greece and Rome, love was depicted as an attack, characterized as Cupid shooting arrows towards the lover, without his/her consent<sup>49</sup>. On Romantic love, another of Plato’s theories in his *Symposium* is through the words of Aristophanes, postulating that all humans are quite literally in the pursuit of their other half; that is, we were once creatures with two faces, four arms, and four legs, but after angering the gods, all humans were split in half and cursed into a never-ending quest to find their missing half. Love for Aristophanes is then the longing to find the other part that was once our self, and *if* found, it would make us feel whole again. Although we must not forget

<sup>49</sup> See (Grafton, 2010).

Aristophanes was a comedian, and given the setting of Plato's account, he was also very possibly drunk.

During the Middle Ages, Andreas Capellanus referred to the Latin etymology of amor (*amus*) as a hook. Whomever is in love is then *hooked* or captured by desire, simultaneously wishing to capture someone else with their own hook. During the time of courtly love in the Medieval period, romantic love was depicted in songs and literature as a total submission of the man to the woman (whom he loves from the distance), but she is completely unattainable. The man suffers tremendously, but also finds pleasure in his suffering; his life's purpose is to admire the woman he is in love with, although never consummated, as in Petrarca's sonnets. In the Renaissance, romantic love was depicted as an illness and a cruel calamity, as stated by most male authors at the time, but even by women like Hélienne de Crenne in *Torments of Love*.

Famous for his views on love, Stendhal and his European nineteenth century contemporaries portrayed love as a game of delaying pleasure and dwelling on the uncertainty,<sup>50</sup> although supported by erotic subtleties, which would give life a sense of excitement later portrayed in D.H Lawrence novels and Jane Austen's, which include the public's fascinating element of "love at first sight."

In the 1800's German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer argued romantic love is necessarily linked to sexual desire, due to the fact that it is only at the service of our primitive instinct of procreation. Our sexual desire for another person is the byproduct of an illusion consisting in *the belief* that the Other will satisfy our every

<sup>50</sup> See (Martin, 20100).

need. As we fall into the illusion that something will be advantageous to oneself, it is in fact only allowing for reproduction to take place. When desire fades, human beings then become aware such a mirage was only advantageous to the species, inadvertently perpetuating the cycle of heteronormative procreation. Therefore, Schopenhauer is not able to theorize further into homosexual love and desire.

On the other hand, for Nobel-prize winner Bertrand Russel sexuality is not an intrinsic part of love, but rather the result of our innate need for a safe space to shelter ourselves from loneliness and the hardships and cruelty of the world. Intimacy and passion are then the results of love, because without these elements, for Russel, sex is in fact unsatisfying.

During the first years of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* relates desire to the concept of “libido,” and “Eros” to the sexual creative drive. Freud also proposes that as grown-ups, we basically never get over the moment we were one with our mothers while breastfeeding. This “lack” is then posited in various objects of desires which we are never truly able to access because pleasure resides in circling around the object of desire and not actually reaching it. However, romantic love is always the product of our affective bonds with our parents during childhood, leading us as adults to search for a partner whose affectionate attachments seems familiar to the kind of love we experienced as children. Narcissism also plays an important role in our selection of partners, as we often fall in love with people that mirror the image of our ideal self, completing our narcissistic fantasies. Freud also points out that love is the other side of hate. Later on, Jacques Lacan continued with this part of Freud’s theory by coining the term

*hainamoration* (combining hate, and to be enamored). Lacan later coins as well two famous phrases that give wave to uncountable interpretations that still puzzle philosophers; when he said during his Seminar VIII, “The sexual relationship does not exist” and “Love is giving something you don’t have to someone who doesn’t want it.” In other words, arguing love comes to compensate for a lack of sexual connection<sup>51</sup>.

Today, lacanian Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek, repeats through his body of works (but specially in his book *Less than Nothing*) he agrees with Lacan’s view on love; that is because the sexual act is so violent and shocking that humans are unconsciously always trying to suppress the impossibility of being completely free during sex, and avoiding “the ghost” which appears between two people during the sexual act. By “the ghost” Zizek refers to a set of repressed memories and emotions, as well phantasies that stand between lovers during the sexual act. Hence, for Zizek, sex is actually, truly impossible, because it wakes up every aspect of our repressed memories, phantasies, lacks, and childhood traumas. Zizek also sides with Alain Badiou’s theory of love agreeing on love as “an encounter between two,” but a rather violent one. Hence the term “falling in love” in English and French; meaning after such encounter nothing is the same again. It is a contingent and traumatic encounter which will have an irreversible impact on one’s life. However, he argues romantic love is everyday rarer in this sense, because modern humanity wishes for love *without the fall*; this is to say, love without the violence of the encounter which will ultimately change the course of one’s life, for good or bad.

<sup>51</sup> See (Fink, 2016).



Zizek continuously criticizes western capitalist cultures, where he believes, the youth seek for love, or other objects of desire, but only if they can avoid the risk. “We want sexuality without the fall or fatal attachment as a consequence of a superficial consumerist attitude” (120).

In the Buddhist philosophy, romantic love is an attempt to satisfy superficial needs. As first established by Siddhartha Gautama, true love is first towards Mother Nature. Contemporary Buddhist monk and author Thich Nhat Hanh explains romantic love leads into attachments, which consequently lead into suffering. Generally speaking, if it arises from compulsion, habit or need; then it is not true love and can only hinder both parts. Desire and passion are in fact obstacles for reaching nirvana and engaging in true love with the Earth and all of its beings. For Buddhism, according to Nhat Hanh, romantic love can only become “true love” if it possesses the elements of loving kindness, compassion, joy and inclusiveness; where one cannot distinguish or discriminate between the other’s suffering and our own suffering, because he adds: “in Buddhism the other’s well-being is my well-being” (34). Thus, for romantic love to become true love, it must expand towards every person, animal, and element on Earth. Similarly, Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* also mentions romantic love should be understood simply as the desire to integrate with another being or beings which would allow us to reach beyond ourselves and integrate with another or others.

The fact that human beings insist on putting themselves through romantic love. often without success I would argue, but remain captivated by the same love stories, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Tristan and Isolde*, Hollywood romances like *The*

*Notebook* and even Latin-American telenovelas; reveal the public's attachment to a very limited aspect of love that remains unquestioned and reiterated through patriarchal normativity exploited as entertainment. As a result, traditional romantic love remains unquestioned and therefore captivating for the wrong reasons. De Beauvoir as well as Goldman do not question what love is per se, but rather, how we can love better, outside the norms that diminish our potential as women, and this is precisely the way women can reconfigure and re-claim the power of *eros*.

## Conclusions

Throughout this dissertation I have presented texts by Chicana feminists written during the second half of the twentieth century, as well as an interpretation of love and its various kinds of intersections. It has been my intention to expand the awareness of love as more than a feeling, but rather as a political category that impacts how we present ourselves to the world in the fight for equality. The matter of love becomes a category that transcends the private and questions our role as citizens and members of a community.

The fact that love is directly linked to law, and public affairs is exemplified by the government policy over sexual relations and our bodies. In Mexico, I have witnessed the current president (Andrés Manuel López Obrador) achieve his position in government through support from a group of citizens proclaiming themselves AMLOVERS. Before his election as president, I witnessed a number of rallies in Mexico City as well as artistic endeavors of agitation and propaganda using AMLO's campaign motto: "Vota por el amor." I have always wondered if the artists and political activists who subscribed to what later became the movement #votoxelamor asked themselves if the love they claimed would change the country for good was directed towards the people, the political party, AMLO's platform or the leader himself. It seemed to me that it was a movement of delusional love, devotion and borderline worship of a man who used love as propaganda or marketing strategy. Boundless love towards a leader or a system, to me, is terrifying because it quickly becomes a neurotic and fanatical kind of love that can have potentially devastating consequences. Perhaps in some aspect, North Korea's

current totalitarian regime is the product of the dialectics of love. As Bryan Myers affirms, in North Korea today; the people's alleged love for Kim Jong-Un, is a forced weapon of control that has expanded into a "cult-like" devotion towards the Kim dynasty that gives only two options: to love or to fear. A frightening example of this is the song "No Motherland without You" created for Kim Jong-Un's father and previous dictator. This ode to the leader is still sung by the army, now in reference to Kim-Jong-Un.

Likewise, I believe, the extensive cases of racism, bigotry and violence toward Latinos/as in the United States after Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign appeals to a psychotic love disguised as nostalgia for a white "motherland," which was supposedly better when there were fewer rights for minorities.

These cases only support my claim which is that the way we love, the way we are expected to love, how we are taught to love, and either punished or rewarded for our love, is a serious matter that affects every part of the social dynamics. The "duty" of "unconditional love" is thrust upon women, because the myopic belief that womanhood is necessarily linked to motherhood; and motherhood, as I explained throughout his work, has been constructed and reinforced by legends, myths, religion and "sacred texts."

Therefore, we cannot escape the dangers of love being intrinsically linked to faith and belief, which are categories that surpass the mere sentiment of affection. This is the reason why love, for women, but especially for Chicanas and Latinas, *must* be reconfigured and constantly reinvented, as the literary corpus I selected for

this work allows us to appreciate. The latter leads me to conclude it is precisely love as a political category and its radical awareness which will enable a future revolutionary shift in consciousness, due to the fact that love, and belief, are intertwined in such a way that escapes pure emotion. What one should or must do in the name of love, constitutes a fundamental aspect we should continue to theorize, as it is a double edge sword when love becomes a proposition that is set as a principle of action.

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